

Visiting with relics: Strengthening the bond within the Community of Saints

I have always prayed to St. Anthony ... for lost keys, lost shoes ... you know, the typical requests using a variation of the prayer, "Anthony, Anthony come around, something's lost and must be found." It sounds more like an incantation than a prayer, but it's a thing we do, and he always comes through.

How are relics obtained?

With St. Anthony's relic recently at my parish and St. Padre Pio coming a few weeks later, I reconsidered this practice of viewing relics. I had to, partly because I had a good deal of work to do with it, and partly to clear this practice up for my own mind.

[Father Mario Conte](#), director of the Messenger of St. Anthony, the Catholic international magazine published by the friars of the Basilica of St Anthony in Padua, Italy, explained how St. Anthony's floating rib and a piece of skin from his face came to be part of a traveling devotion. I have to say, it put my mind at ease. Because before that, I always had terrible, gruesome ideas about harvesting parts.

- **It's not a graveyard robbery.** Like a dope, I always pictured guys picking parts off of freshly dead holy people to sell to churches. Too many horror movies when I was a kid, I guess. It actually takes several years (if not decades) for a person to be declared a saint, so no point to taking pieces of them beforehand. But in the case of St. Anthony, he was canonized a little less than a year after he died. At that time, the friars went to move his body and opened up the casket. They discovered that his tongue and jaw were uncorrupted, so they took

it to venerate. They put the rest of his normally decayed body, put it in a smaller casket and sent it to Padua. In 1981, 800 years after his death, they opened it up again and took a floating rib and a piece of his face skin.

- **Relics have to be certified.** The Church has three different classes of relic: A first-class relic is an actual piece of the saint, second class is something that the saint used or wore, and third class is something that touched a first-class relic. The procurement of a first-class relic is a very orderly and official process. Only someone in authority (like a pastor) can request one, and it comes with paperwork from the group that manages the particular saint's relics, proving that it's legit. The Vatican manages some, and societies and religious orders manage ones that are associated with a saint. (They also sell them on Ebay, but I wouldn't get one there.)
- **Not all of them are for sale.** When I heard that St. Anthony was coming to our parish, I was excited because I thought we were going to get to keep him. I was wrong. Anthony's relics aren't for sale, but they do travel the globe for visits. We got to have him for a whole day, and he drew a crowd. We celebrated Mass, prayed the rosary, and just kept the Church open for visitors to come and venerate.

People have a real devotion to St. Anthony. They came and wrote prayers to put by him, they touched things to his reliquary (the container holding the relics) to take home from the visit, and they kissed the reliquary. People were very moved by the experience. We were able to get the relics at our parish because our bishop, at my pastor's (my boss') request, made an application to the Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua to allow them to come. Father Mario, with an assistant,

accompanied the relics to our parish and helped us to make a really beautiful day for our parishioners and diocese. Many saints have societies who can offer something like this, and they have different requirements for making a visit. Pastors can look into that if they're interested.

What is the point of visiting with relics?

Father Conte gave some perspective on the purpose of relics when he preached at our morning Mass. Relics bring a loved one closer to us. We all keep little memories of our loved ones: pictures, letters, things that belonged to the ones we loved to remember them and feel close to them when they aren't with us. Relics are the same. Father Conte said it was like having a hug or a handshake with the saint when we touch the reliquary, the container for holding relics. He's right. As I said before, people were very moved at the opportunity to have that physical contact with St. Anthony.

- **They bring us closer to our community in prayer.** The constant stream of people who came through the Church the day St. Anthony was there became something of an impromptu community. Some were our own parishioners; many were not. They stood on line together sharing stories, prayed together and celebrated Mass together. We were all there to see a common friend, and that made us better friends, too.
- **They are part of our extended family.** The Catholic Church teaches that the communion of saints are God's extended family of those who are living and those who are in heaven. We continue to have a relationship with the saints as they pray for us, and we ask them to pray for us. We hold them as examples of faith, of living their relationship with God fully, as people who were attached to aspects of life that we're interested in, and they are our patrons. They are patrons of churches, our confirmation names, our hobbies and vocations (Did you know there's even a patron saint of beekeepers?).

They are our friends in heaven, and hanging out with relics can make a stronger connection for us of how close we really are to those who have gone before us.

- **It's an opportunity to learn more about the life of that saint.** Before St. Anthony came to my parish, I knew that he was from Padua and that he found lost stuff. Because we have a very talented body of parishioners, a professor of medieval and Church history was able to offer us an evening to learn about the life of St. Anthony. Did you know St. Anthony is not Italian?! Shocking, I know! He's actually Portuguese. He was a rich kid who wanted to be a martyr, but that didn't work out, so he wound up being an amazing preacher and teacher to very common people. He was ordained for one order and switched to another; he was a fascinating character! And, I found out the reason that Anthony is the saint of lost things. A jealous friar stole Anthony's psalter, and Anthony stayed calm and just prayed that the guy would return it. Eventually, the friar was so racked with guilt that he did return it. And the rest is history. I would never have thought to look into the life of St. Anthony if his relics weren't coming to our parish.
- **Parishes often have their own relics.** Many parishes have at least one relic, probably of the parish's patron. My parish has a whole bunch of little first-class relics that we display on the feast day of that particular saint. I think now we'll make a bigger deal of them since we've had this experience. Ask your pastor if your parish has any. He'll probably be delighted to show them and teach about the life of the saint. He might even be willing to bring them into religious education classes.

I have to say, the experience of having St. Anthony's relics impressed me and made me really appreciate that tradition of

our Catholic faith. I've never been great on the lives of the saints, but this has made me want to learn more about them.

Learn more

[The Basilica of St. Anthony of Padua website](#)

[Why Do Catholics Venerate Relics?](#)