

Background and History of the Cloak of St Joseph

Church tradition has recorded that the cloak used by St. Joseph near the end of his life had been kept as an important treasure by the faith community in Jerusalem for centuries. St. Jerome, who translated the bible (Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin) – (Gospels from Greek to Latin) lived with the Christian community in Jerusalem for approximately 20 years. Jerome being an important and prominent member of the community convinced Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem, priests and faithful that Joseph's cloak would be safer and better kept in Rome away from the danger of conquest and pillaging. So near the end of the 4th Century AD, when Jerome made a pilgrimage to Rome he transported the cloak with him. The cloak was brought to the church of St. Anastasia (Sryo-Malabar Eastern Rite Catholic Church - aligned with Rome) where Jerome was to reside and performed his priestly duties. The cloak has remained on guard in safe seclusion there to this very day. It is only available for public exposition on St. Joseph's feast on March 19th each year.

In 1950, Bishop William Mulloy, the 6th Bishop of Covington, was able to obtain the treasure of this second class relic, a thread from the cloak provided by St. Anastasia Basilica in Rome. The diocese has kept this relic among its collection of relics (reliquary) which largely have not been displayed outside of liturgical celebrations on their associated feasts. This practice will soon change in the very near future, as the Cathedral Basilica is in the process of building a reliquary display altar to securely house the collection for continuous public exposition.



Classification – Veneration – Acquisition of Relics

There are three classes of Holy Relics designated in the Catholic Church:

- 1) First Class Relic – consists of a bodily part of the saint (bone, hair or decayed tissue ash) or the instruments of Christ's passion.
- 2) Second Class Relic – is something owned by the saint (clothing or some other personal affect) or an instrument of torture used against a martyred saint.
- 3) Third Class Relic – is some object (rosary, scapular, holy card, necklace etc.) that has been touched against a 1st or 2nd class relic. The faithful are permitted to own 3rd class relics through the process of touching it to a 1st or 2nd class relic, which includes the tomb of a saint.

Relics are usually stored in some safe place in a church or chapel in some type containment (sepulcher, blessed altar stone, display box, reliquary display or altar).

Cannon Law #1190 §1 specifies, it is absolutely and morally improper to sell relics for profit. If the acquisition is from a private sale (the term used is "simony") that would be deemed as saving the relic from future desecration or abuse, then the monetary purchase outweighs the money used to affect

the greater good. Caution and prudence should dictate that relics never be obtained from auction or bidding sites (eBay) that by design produce competition and drive up the cost that encourages greed and continued exploitation of relics in the marketplace. Most often relics are obtained from churches, religious orders or shrines involved with the saint. It is not improper to adequately compensate (make a donation) to the originator for valid costs such as the “theca” (small metal container housing the relic) and transportation or possibly insurance costs. But again, this precludes that this not be a profitable exercise for the acquisition. § 2 “Distinguished Relics” (usually 1st or 2nd class relics) should not be alienated or transferred from the designated place of veneration on a permanent basis without permission obtained by the Apostolic See.

History of Christian Relic Veneration

The veneration, respect and valuation of an object, be it bodily parts, clothing or a personal possession(s) of a person that attained some honor of heroic status appears to be an expression of human instinct that even predates the advent of Christianity. But for sure, Christians are most widely attributed with the practice of venerating relics from their heroes, their saints, that proved their faith and love for Jesus by the expression of their lives - no matter what circumstances confronted them.

Early Christian Era - This was most evident in the effort that the early Christian communities took to recover the remains of those martyred for their faith. One of the earliest citations comes to us from the faith community in Smyrna (*Greek city located in present day Turkey*) in 156 AD that described the death of Polycarp, their bishop. Polycarp was martyred by being burnt at the stake. The Christians immediately wanted to carry off his remains but were blocked by Roman soldiers. Patiently they waited, and at the right time when his remains were not guarded *“we took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place.”* They gathered at this place as the Lord permitted in joy and gladness to celebrate the victory, the greater glory to God the saint’s life represented to them. It became common practice to preserve any physical remains, clothing and possessions from their saintly heroes and distribute them throughout the known world for veneration. The miraculous physical and spiritual healings reported from veneration prayer and being in the presence of these relics is most responsible for the continuation of this practice of devotion.

Early Middle Ages - As time passed and Christianity’s freedoms became wide spread, many significant churches began to be built over the sites of either the saint’s martyrdom or graves. Much of the same practice of venerating and sharing of relics continued in this era.

Late Middle Ages – As the threat or likelihood of being martyred for the faith lessened in this era the lives of those heroically committed to God through their faith continued. Not only were 1st and 2nd class relics still important but the writings and memoirs of those that were officially designated or colloquially viewed as saints were also of great value. Pilgrims were traveling from far and wide to visit and venerate the relics for a multitude of reasons.

During this era we begin to see some of the abuses and even extortion of the value of relics. Caution was issued of itinerant imposters dressed as monks seeking to enrich themselves in the sale and trade of relics. We also begin to see the burden that new church communities faced in wanting to build a church and of the necessity of obtaining the obligatory relic of the desired patron saint for the parish. There were also rivalries between certain religious centers for the possession of some unique or startling relic.

Veneration vs. Worship and Abuse

From early on Christian Catholics were cautioned about how to view relics. St Jerome wrote: *"We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order to better to adore Him whose martyrs they are."* St Cyril of Alexandria also commented, *"We by no means consider the holy martyrs to be gods, nor are we wont to bow down before them adoringly, but only relatively and reverentially do we honor them."* We still to this day, from one generation to the next need to heed and keep a right relationship between veneration and adoration in check so we do not cross the line and fall into an abusive relationship of the true meaning relics have in our lives.

Many synods and councils in Church history addressed the concerns of the day concerning the veneration of relics at the time. The Council of Trent became an important milestone in response to our right relationship with relics. Reformation critics of relics through the late middle ages into the Renaissance Era pointed out there was no scriptural basis for venerating relics and the harm that some of the abuses of relics had on the practice of faith required sweeping reforms by the Church. The response from the Council of Trent after rigorous debate concluded that *"The holy bodies of the holy martyrs and of others who dwell with Christ....are to be honored by the faithful."* This preserved the practice of venerating the relics in the Church.

Summary

The Catholic world-wide community has taken the pronouncement and reforms of the Council of Trent to heart and has by-and-large the right relationship to our saintly heroes and their corporal affects. We love our saints and cling to their earthly substance and the spirit they possessed as not being divine, but created and therefore like ourselves, weak and fallible. We love the idea that they were able rise above earthly concerns by connecting their human spirit with the spirit of God that produced a faith that was unshakable – that they showed us the way to this perfection. We still must guard against scrupulosity and misalignment of this faith practice today and forward in each age and generation.

