

## Devotion to Relics in Seven Questions

[Church of Cambrai, n°26, September 2020](#)

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2020, the Reliquary containing the bodies of our Sisters, Martyrs during the French Revolution, was offered to the Cambrai Diocese by the Ursuline community in Saint-Saulve. A strong symbol, showing that relics still have a whole place in the Catholic faith.



### 1. What is the origin of the devotion to relics?

Devotion to the relics of martyrs existed already in the beginning of the Christian era<sup>1</sup>. Originally it was not permitted to move away the bodies of the martyrs, but the Holy Eucharist was celebrated on their tombs, a sign that related the passion of Christ with that of the martyrs. This is the origin of the tradition expressed by the Council of Carthage in 401, of placing the relics of the martyrs under the altar at the moment of their consecration. This practice is still a current one.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. What is a relic ?

The word comes from the Latin, *reliquiae*, which means *remains*. Relics are therefore what « remains » of saints and martyrs, either parts of their body or things they owned, or even instruments of their torments, if they were martyrs.

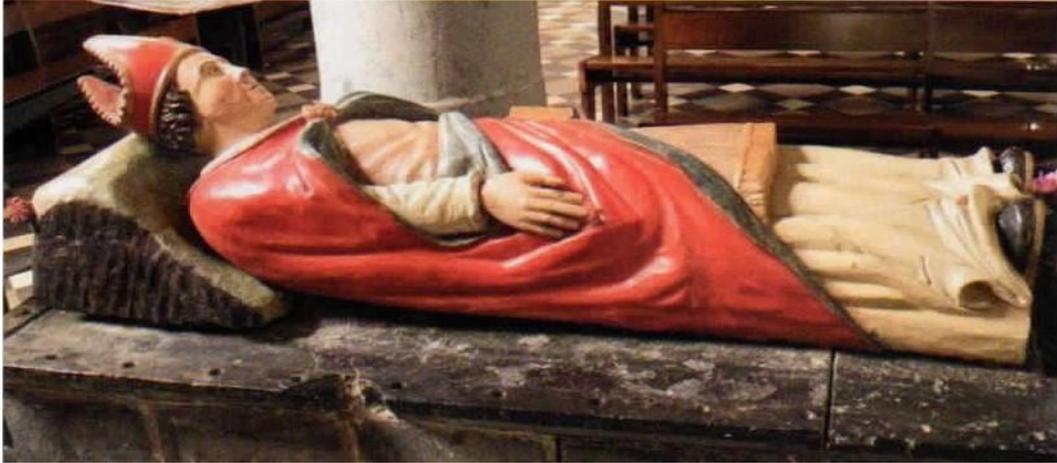
There are different kinds of relics:

- Noteworthy relics : the whole body of a saint or one of its whole members (skull, arm, etc.).
- Worthwhile relics : (the whole part of a body, but not a member of it (piece of a skull, of a rib, of a jaw).
- Minimal relics (or light ones : a piece or a fragment of the body).

<sup>1</sup> cf In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: Martyrdom of Polycarp, XVIII, 1-3

<sup>2</sup> cf. Presentation of the Roman Missal. 202

The word *relics* is also used in a rather an unsuitable manner when we venerate clothes or other objects that belonged to a saint. There is also a mention of « **contact relics** » for cloth that has been placed on the reliquary of a saint, or directly on the original relic.



*Saint Etton recumbent in the church of Dompierre-Sur-Helpe*

### **3. Should the worship of relics be encouraged?**

Worship of relics can certainly give way to superstition or fetichism. However, after Vatican II, the Roman Congregation for the Cause of Saints, encouraged this worship<sup>3</sup>: « *In the Church, relics have always been the object of a particular veneration or attention, because the bodies of the Beatified and of the Saints, destined for Resurrection, were on earth living temples of the Holy Spirit and means for acquiring holiness.* »<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Should we « venerate » or « adore » relics ?**

Adoration is a form of worship of God alone ; veneration is a religious act addressed to saints. In a theological language, we say that the veneration of relics is not in the order of a *latria* (adoration directed to God alone), but of a *dulia* (a simple veneration).

In any case, venerating relics must guide the hearts of the faithful to rise in adoration of God, the only one who is perfectly holy. The saint we venerate is a sort of road leading us to adore God.

St. Jerome (+ 420) wrote as follows : « *We honor the relics of the martyrs in order to adore the One for whom they were martyred. We honor the servants so that the honor given them returns to the Lord* ». »<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> cf Constitution on the Holy Liturgy, n° 111.

<sup>4</sup> Instruction : « Relics in the Church-- their Authenticity and Conservation » December 5, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> St .Jerome, Contra Vigilantium.



*Reliquary containing the relics of Saint Maxellende. Every year, on the Sunday after November 13, the parish of Saint Maxellende (Caudry) celebrates its patron saint.*

### **5. How should relics be venerated?**

Among the means used to venerate relics, we can mention: « kissing, lighting up, decorating with flowers, using them for blessings, or carrying them in processions, bringing them also to the sick, in order to comfort them and highlight their request to be healed.. In any case, we should avoid exhibiting relics on the altar, for an altar is set aside for the Body and Blood of Christ, the King of martyrs. »<sup>6</sup>



*Reliques de ste Aldegonde portées par une jeune fille en cameline (la cape des chanoinesses du cloître mixte de Maubeuge fondé par la sainte)*



*Vénération de la Châsse contenant les reliques de ste Maxellende*

Relics of Saint Aldegonde, carried by a girl wearing a "camlaine", the cape of the Canonesses of the cloister of Maubeuge (founded by thi saint).

Veneration of the Reliquary of Saint Maxellende

### **6 What do the theologians say ?**

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote on this subject: « When you love someone, after his death, you venerate all that remains of him, not only his body and parts of his body, but also material objects like his clothes. Therefore it is evident that we must have veneration for God's saints,

<sup>6</sup> Roman Directory on Popular Devotion and Liturgy ». 2003. no. 237

for they are members of Christ, sons and friends of God, and our intercessors before Him. Therefore, it is evident that in memory of them, we are to venerate in a worthwhile manner all that they left us, especially their body, for it was the temple and organ of the Holy Spirit who lived and acted in them, and they must be configured to the body of Christ through a glorious resurrection.»<sup>7</sup>

### **7 What did Pope Benedict XVI say about them?**

« Relics lead us to God Himself ; in fact He is the one who, with His strength and grace, gives to weak beings the courage to be His witnesses before the world. When the Church invites us to venerate the mortal remains of martyrs and saints, it certainly does not forget that they are certainly mere human bones, but bones that belonged to persons who were visited by God's transcending power »<sup>8</sup>

Father Bertrand ESTIENNE,  
Diocesan Service of Liturgy

We thank Father Bertrand Estienne and the Service of Communication of the Diocese of Cambrai

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<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica*, III a, quest. 25, a, 6.

<sup>8</sup> To young people in Köln during the WYD on August 18 2005.