

On Relics

I should have addressed this some time ago, since so many have asked about which saints we have in the reliquaries of the altar here at OLMC. The reliquaries are permanently exposed on the altar, though according to the rubrics, are veiled for Eucharistic Adoration. There are four reliquaries, containing two relics each.

Squeamish moderns might quail at the thought of human bones on display, but relics serve a number of purposes. The Council of Trent (cf. Session XXV) points out that “The holy bodies of holy martyrs and of others now living with Christ – which bodies were the living members of Christ and the temples of the Holy Ghost and which are by Him to be raised to eternal life and to glorified are to be venerated by the faithful, for through these bodies many benefits are bestowed by God on men...” The relics are then a direct contact with heaven, since the saints to whom they belong are enjoying the beatific vision as we regard the relics.

Continuing the thought the Council says, “If the clothes, the kerchiefs (Acts 19.12), if the shadow of the saints (Acts 5.15), before they departed from this life, banished diseases and restored strength, who will have the hardihood to deny that God wonderfully works the same by the sacred ashes, the bones and other relics of the saints?” This is the lesson we have to learn from that dead body which, having been accidentally let down into the sepulcher of Eliseus, “when it had touched the bones of the Prophet, instantly came to life” (4 Kings, 13.21, and Eccclus., 48.14). We may add that this miracle as well as the veneration shown to the bones of Moses (Ex. 13.19 and Jos., 24.32) only gain additional force from their apparent contradiction to the ceremonial laws against defilement, of which we read in Num., 19.11-22. Check out the scripture references, they’re fascinating.

The following saint’s relics are in our reliquaries, identified as *ex ossibus* “from the bones” of five male saints, and three female:

1. St. Clement: Feast Day, November 23. He was a pope, the fourth bishop of Rome, serving in the last decade of the first century. He is a martyr, and was cast into the sea with an anchor around his neck. He is named in the Canon of the Mass.
2. St. Modestus: There are six saints named Modestus, it is not certain which one we have.
3. St. Quirinus: There are five saints with this name, it is not certain which one we have.
4. St. Victorinus: There are four saints with this name, it is not certain which one we have.
5. St. Elidor: Most likely a diocesan saint from England. There is a church named after him in England, near Pembroke.
6. St. Liberata: There are four saints with this name, it is not certain which one we have.

7. St. Lucretia: Feast day, November 22. She was a martyr, who died for the Faith in Merida in western Spain during the Roman persecutions in 306 A.D.

8. St. Ursula: Feast day, October 21. There are a number of stories about her, but none of which can be confirmed. Christopher Columbus named the Virgin Islands after her. St. Ursula is on the British Virgin Islands coat of arms.

It may be somewhat disappointing to you to know so little about these saints, or even which ones they are. But what if the relics are false or faked? That is a possibility, since the manufacture of false relics was done in the Middle Ages, and doubtless you have heard of that abuse. But have you heard of how zealous the Church was to stop the forgery? The punishments were severe for such behavior.

St. Pius X was zealous in this regard, and he knew of a church (not open to the public) in Rome that had (among many odd relics) three heads of St. John the Baptist, feathers from the wings of St. Michael the Archangel, a couple of bottles that had some of the darkness that covered Egypt in them, and various other spurious things. After he became pope, St. Pius had those relics removed and taken to...well, wherever you take fake relics, and destroyed. The possibility of fake relics now is very, very slim.

Some say there is no way there can be so many relics of saints. I think there can be. From one of the arms of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, 17,000 relics were made. That’s a fair amount of relics. Granted, they are minute chips, but relics none the less.

The saints in our reliquaries have feast days which are no longer observed in the new liturgical calendar. Pope Paul VI for example, had St. Ursula removed from the calendar (but not the Martyrology), not because she is no longer a saint, but because he wanted the faithful to venerate saints about whom we know a great deal, as opposed to venerating saints about whom we know very little.

That these relics on our altar have been venerated for centuries, should give us pause, and appreciation. They were carefully guarded and protected by generations upon generations of Catholics.

And if we don’t know much about these saints, then at least we know this, that they gave their lives for Christ. Maybe that’s all we need to know about them.