

□ Reading time: 8 min.

At the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV, the news of his new pectoral cross aroused particular interest, into which the relics of Saint Leo the Great, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas of Villanova and Blessed Anselmo Polanco Fontecha were inserted. An eloquent sign of the Holy Father's profound veneration for the saints and his trust in their intercession, confirmed moreover by his frequent visits to shrines and moments of prayer before their relics.

In this context, it is natural to ask: what value did relics have for Don Bosco?

A faith that can be touched

In a time like ours, accustomed to measuring things by their immediate usefulness, the veneration of relics can seem a distant practice, almost incomprehensible, a residue of the past, outdated by modern Christians. What can a fragment of bone, a shred of clothing, an object belonging to a saint say today?

Yet the Church, since the early centuries, has kept relics not as amulets or lucky charms, but as concrete signs of the communion of saints, a living memory of men in whom the grace of God took on flesh, history, sacrifice, perseverance. It is a profession of faith in the resurrection of the flesh, the body of one who lived in the grace of God, destined for glory, deserves honour and safekeeping, because it was a temple of the Holy Spirit and an instrument of charity.

Saint John Bosco lived this conviction with the practicality that was characteristic of him. For him, relics were not museum pieces, but a living presence, the tangible sign that holiness is possible, that the Church is a single family throughout the centuries, and that the saints continue from Heaven to intercede and accompany Christians still journeying on earth.

In his writings, he willingly insists on the biblical foundation of this practice. He recalls Elijah's cloak picked up by Elisha, Elisha's bones upon contact with which a dead man comes back to life, the hem of Jesus' cloak touched by the sick woman, Saint Paul's handkerchiefs brought to the sick, Peter's shadow sought by the sick.

The argument is simple and popular. If God wanted to use objects linked to his servants to manifest his mercy, the Christian can venerate those signs with faith, without attributing an autonomous power to them. Grace comes from God; the saints intercede; the relic reminds, recalls, encourages.

The writer of the martyrs

The first chapter of this veneration is his tireless activity as a writer and populariser of the memory of the martyrs. In the “Catholic Readings” (*Letture Cattoliche*), the popular series he founded in 1853, Don Bosco published numerous biographies of the witnesses of the faith of the early centuries: the *Life of Saint Pancras the Martyr*, the lives of the martyr popes Lucius I and Stephen I, the account of the pontificate of Saint Denis, the booklet *A Family of Martyrs*. His *Ecclesiastical History* also dedicates passionate pages to the places where the bodies of the martyrs were laid and venerated by the early Christians.

The interest was not only literary. The catacombs were for him the historical proof that the Catholic Church of his time was the same as that of the martyrs, a powerful apologetic argument in years of bitter anti-Catholic polemics, but also a motive for profound personal devotion.

The pilgrim of Rome

Christian Rome struck him precisely because of this density of memory. On his first Roman journey in 1858, he wanted to visit basilicas, shrines, and churches renowned for their relics and for the memory of the martyrs. At the Pantheon he contemplated the pagan temple transformed into a church dedicated to Mary and all the martyrs, enriched by the relics translated from the catacombs. At Saint Mary Major he venerated the relic of the Holy Crib and the memory of the apostle Matthias. At Santa Pudenziana he celebrated Mass in a place linked to the memory of Saint Peter and the first Christians of Rome. At San Clemente he paused before the relics of the martyr Pope and Saint Ignatius of Antioch. He went down into the catacombs of San Sebastiano on the Appian Way and those of San Callisto, explored precisely in those years and which Providence would later entrust to his sons. In the following days he continued to visit churches “renowned either for devotion to Mary

Most Holy, or for relics of saints, or for memories of the triumphs of the faith”.

In the Eternal City, where for centuries the remains of the martyrs and, according to tradition, the relics of the apostles Peter and Paul had been kept, the Piedmontese priest touched first-hand that continuity of faith which he would later recount to his boys and to the readers of his publications.

The Turinese martyrs and the sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians

Don Bosco's link with relics reaches its peak in the story of the sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians in Valdocco. According to the account he himself gave, Our Lady indicated to him in a dream the exact place where, in Roman times, Saints Adventor, Solutor, and Octavius, soldiers of the Theban Legion and the first martyrs of Turin, had suffered martyrdom. The great church was to be built precisely on that ground. It is no coincidence that on the tympanum of the façade Don Bosco wanted to place the statues of the three martyrs, and inside he had a chapel prepared in their honour.

The most solemn moment was the consecration of the church on 9 June 1868. The previous evening, according to the ancient rite, the Archbishop of Turin, Alessandro Riccardi di Netro, exposed for the veneration of the faithful, in the small church of Saint Francis de Sales, the relics of the holy martyrs Maurice and Secundus, also of the Theban Legion. Although a violent storm had struck Turin that night, the prayer vigil before the sacred relics lasted until dawn, when they were solemnly transported and sealed in the altar of the new church, as the liturgy prescribes for every consecrated altar. The *Biographical Memoirs* describe those hours with an abundance of detail. Don Bosco wanted his young people to take part in the vigil, so that they would understand that the new church was literally born *upon* the martyrs, according to the ancient custom of the Church which celebrates the Eucharist on the bones of the witnesses of Christ.

Relics as an educational tool

As a practical educator, Don Bosco knew that young people need to see, to touch, to remember. Faith, in order to grow, needs the Word, the sacraments, catechesis, but also signs that speak to the imagination, to the memory, to the affections. For this reason, sacred images, the feasts of the saints, pilgrimages, the recounting of exemplary lives and the veneration of relics found a place in his pedagogy, not to feed curiosity, but to kindle the desire to imitate.

In the first educational facilities of Valdocco, each dormitory had a titular saint. The young people celebrated their feast with the sacraments, singing, prayers, and the decoration of the image; sometimes they were given a relic to kiss. The *Biographical Memoirs* observe that this, combined with the other means of piety, increasingly kindled the fervour of devotion.

In the preventive system, religion is one of the three pillars, along with reason and loving-kindness, and the saints are proposed to the young as concrete and attainable models. Recounting the lives of the martyrs, showing their relics, and leading the boys to pray before them meant making holiness visible, rescuing it from abstractness and transforming it into a fascinating ideal. It is not surprising that Dominic Savio, the fifteen-year-old canonised in 1954, whose relics are today venerated alongside those of his teacher, flourished precisely in his school. Don Bosco carefully guarded the relics he received as gifts, had them placed in the altars of the churches he was building – from Saint John the Evangelist in Turin to the Sacred Heart in Rome – and encouraged in his spiritual sons a sober, well-founded and trusting cult of the saints.

The final image: the Sacred Heart in Rome

A particularly significant episode takes place at the end of his life, in the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, built amidst enormous sacrifices. While Don Bosco was in the Vatican, the relics destined for the sepulchre of the high altar arrived at the church: a particle of the crib of the Baby Jesus and relics of the apostles Peter, Paul and James, of the martyr Lawrence and of Saint Francis de Sales, patron of the Salesian Family. Placed in a golden urn, they were exposed in the old chapel, while the hymn of the martyrs was sung.

It is a moving image: the elderly Don Bosco, by now consumed by his labours, sees his Roman work take root in the memory of Christ, of the apostles, of the martyrs

and of the saint of pastoral sweetness from whom the Salesians take their name.

From venerating to venerated

There is a luminous paradox in the story of Don Bosco: the man who all his life had venerated the relics of the saints became himself one of the most venerated relics in Christendom. When Pius XI proclaimed him blessed on 2 June 1929, the apostolic brief *Mirabilis Deus* expressly granted that his body and his relics be exposed for the public veneration of the faithful. Since then, the saint's remains have rested in the urn of the altar dedicated to him in the basilica of Mary Help of Christians, while a notable relic – a portion of his brain – is kept in the Basilica of Colle Don Bosco, near his birthplace. In preparation for the bicentenary of his birth (2015), an urn containing a notable relic of his right arm made a pilgrimage to all continents, welcomed everywhere by crowds of young people and devotees, a sign that Don Bosco's logic – holiness that makes itself close, visible, touchable – continues to speak to today's world.

Valdocco, a rare treasure

In the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, the mortal remains of Saint John Bosco, Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, and Saint Dominic Savio are preserved today. Beneath the Basilica is the Chapel of Relics, where Blessed Michael Rua, Don Bosco's first successor, and Blessed Philip Rinaldi, the third successor, rest, together with the bodies of all the Rectors Major. The Chapel houses over three thousand relics of saints and martyrs of the Church.

Its true jewel is the relic of the wood of the Holy Cross, preserved in a reliquary on an alabaster base. In another artistic reliquary is kept a fragment of the relic of the Most Precious lateral Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, obtained through the interest of Commendatore Michele Bert from the then Bishop of Mantua, Monsignor Giuseppe Sarto, later Pope Saint Pius X. It is enclosed in a small glass tube tied with red silk thread and provided with a seal, and on a special tag Monsignor Sarto wrote in his own hand the origin and authenticity of the relic, taken on 2 October 1886, from the one venerated in the Cathedral of Mantua. A density of relics that is very rarely found elsewhere in the world, right in Don Bosco's basilica.

A devotion that continues

The veneration of relics, so dear to Don Bosco, does not therefore belong to a concluded past: the current Pontiff also lives and bears witness to it. Pope Leo XIV, elected on 8 May 2025, even wears the relics of saints on his chest. In the silver pectoral cross given to him by the Circolo San Pietro on the day of his election, *ex ossibus* fragments of four great bishops were inserted: Saint Leo the Great, his namesake predecessor on the chair of Peter; Saint Augustine of Hippo, father of the religious family from which the Pope comes; Saint Thomas of Villanova, Augustinian and Archbishop of Valencia; and Blessed Anselmo Polanco, Augustinian, Bishop of Teruel and martyr.

The initiative was born from the custodian of the Apostolic Shrine, the Augustinian Father Bruno Silvestrini, who interpreted the Pontiff's desire to entrust himself to the protection of Saint Leo the Great and turned to [the reliquary maker Antonino Cottone](#). Using the traditional medieval techniques of *paperoles* – tiny filigrees of gilded paper on moiré fabric – the craftsman created the small reliquary cross, having already prepared the relics for the cross received by the future Pope in 2023, containing among other things fragments of Saint Augustine and Saint Monica.

Leo XIV's gesture says, with the language of our time, exactly what Don Bosco taught his boys at Valdocco. The saints are not distant figures, but companions on the journey; their relics are not inert remains, but the living memory of a grace that continues to operate.

What is venerated

A relic is not simply a fragment of a saint's body or an object that touched them, and its value does not lie in having belonged to a famous person whose virtues it reminds us of. It is matter in which the holiness of God has made itself present in the life of the saint and even after their death, as a testimony to life without end. The miracles that God has chosen to perform through relics tell us that the saint's body has fully become a temple of the Holy Spirit and that God wishes to remain there even beyond their earthly existence. What is venerated is therefore not a

piece of matter, but God himself who has sanctified that matter.

It should not surprise us. In the Christian tradition, even respect for the bodies of ordinary, non-saintly deceased persons is independent of the value of that person's life. It is founded on respect for God, the Creator of every human being. It is no coincidence that burying the dead is one of the seven corporal works of mercy.

The veneration of relics remains as a testimony to God's action in the history of humanity, a veneration that needs faith to continue an uninterrupted tradition of the Church. Because where there is no true faith, there is not even the recognition of God's work.