

Would you pay to see John the Baptist's tooth?

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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BALTIMORE (RNS) Martina Bagnoli admits that the exhibit she helps curate here at The Walters Art Museum may gross some people out.

After all, the display includes 2,000-year-old teeth, shards of bone and splinters from a first-century execution device. But these are not just any teeth, bones and splinters.

Tradition holds that they belong to John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, St. Luke, and the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

Once upon a time, pilgrims would trudge halfway around the world just to glimpse one of these objects. Seen as conduits to God, holy relics were carried into battle as talismans, used to cement alliances between heads of state, sold for small fortunes, and coveted by Christians everywhere; some even believed relics could heal the sick.

Now that a bevy of these once-prized objects are on display in downtown Baltimore, the question is: Are holy relics still relevant? Or are they, well, a thing of the past?

"A lot of that depends on what kind of Christian you are," said Bagnoli, the Walters' associate curator of medieval art. "For a lot of people this is still very much relevant."

For instance, a group of Orthodox Christian monks drove down from Boston to see the exhibit in February. And two Catholic nuns dropped by to check out the bones of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded their order, Bagnoli said.

The exhibit, called "Treasures of Heaven," runs through May 15.

Among Christians, the veneration of relics has traditionally been strongest among the Orthodox and Catholics, who, beginning in the second century, created ever more ornate reliquaries to display the sacred objects. Both also mandated that church altars be built on the remains of martyrs and saints to emphasize the continuity of the faith.

But excesses, including the selling of spurious relics -- the infant head of John the Baptist, anyone? -- led Protestant Reformers to ridicule and reject the practice as an unscriptural superstition. The Walters exhibit displays a scorching sermon by Martin Luther, who called relics "completely unnecessary and useless."

Peter Manseau, author of "Rag and Bone," a relic-based travelogue of sorts, said sacred remains often provided holy hubs for new religious movements. "As faith traditions spread rapidly over vast geographies, they needed to have little centers of the sacred -- a little Jerusalem wherever they went."

Other religions, such as Buddhism and some Muslim sects also revere the bodily remnants of holy figures such as the Buddha and Prophet Muhammad, Manseau notes.

Relics still occupy a privileged place among Orthodox Christians, said Peter Bouteneff, a theology professor at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in Crestwood, N.Y. For example, priests are given a cloth sheet with a relic sewn into it, a tangible token of the bishops' blessing, which is placed on the altar during Communion.

"You celebrate the Eucharist incorporating this very physical memory, and a continuity with the saints who have gone before us," said Bouteneff.

For Catholics, the veneration of relics, like many traditional practices, waned after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, when devotions were de-emphasized in favor of wider engagement with the world, according to scholars.

"After Vatican II, relics kind of got put on the shelf," said Thomas Serafin, president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, a

Connecticut-based group dedicated to bringing the remains of Christian heroes back into the limelight.

Michele Dillon, an expert on American Catholicism from the University of New Hampshire, said venerating relics may be making a comeback in the U.S., particularly with the immigration of young Latino Catholics from cultures in which the practice is more widespread.

"It depends on where you look," Dillon said. "You're not going to see veneration of relics as a core part of everyday worship within a lot of Catholic churches. But it remains an important part of private religiosity."

The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and author of "My Life with the Saints," noted that thousands of Catholics crowded St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1999 to be near the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux, a French nun who died more than a century ago.

Martin himself keeps a small relic of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, in his room. It's just "a tiny little speck of something," the priest said, but it imparts a profound message.

"Relics remind us that saints are real people -- not mythological figures, but real flesh-and-blood human beings," Martin said.

The Walters museum provides a book where visitors can write their reflections on the exhibit. Thoughts range from reverent to wacky. "Google is my relic," wrote one visitor.

"Relics still freak most people out," Martin said, "but if you check on eBay" -- where sellers proffer Michael Jackson's shirt and locks of Elvis Presley's hair -- "the idea of wanting to connect physically with someone you admire is not so strange."