

What do relics mean to believers today?

A six-month U.S. tour, *The Heart of a Priest*, is offering the chance to venerate a relic of St. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney.

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



Gerald Dennis Gill, rector of the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, moves towards the altar after the reliquary with the heart of St. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney is set on the table near the front of the sanctuary in a ceremony February 2, 2019. At left is an icon of Vianney commissioned by the Knights of Columbus for a U.S. tour of the relic. Photo by Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans.

It was a ceremony that, except for modern conveniences like central heating and electric lights, and a woman leading congregational singing from the lectern, could have occurred in a European cathedral centuries ago.

The center of attention was a relic: the heart of 19th-century Catholic priest Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, gray but otherwise undecayed, encased in a gold reliquary.

Awash in pungent clouds of incense, clergy escorted the saint's heart up the side aisle and down the center of Philadelphia's Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul before placing the relic on a table facing the congregation of approximately 200 priests, nuns, and laypeople.

Vianney, the patron saint of priests, spent most of his life working in a parish in Ars, France, his reputation for piety and compassion attracting throngs of pilgrims who came to seek his counsel and to have him hear their confessions.

While the rector of the Philadelphia Cathedral, Gerald Dennis Gill, didn't expect the hordes of pilgrims that went to Vianney's shrine in Ars, he said he did anticipate a steady stream of people "coming and asking this heavenly friend, St. John Vianney, to pray for us, especially for our priests."

The Philadelphia stop was part of a six-month national tour, *The Heart of a Priest*, sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization. Spokesman Joseph Cullen said they had been invited to organize the pilgrimage by the rector of the shrine in Ars, where Vianney's heart normally resides.

"The wisdom of venerating relics and drawing close to them is very human—it supports a personal connection on a physical level that strengthens the spiritual link," Cullen said, noting that ten seminaries had already been among the stops on the tour of the relic.

Joy Sowa, a nurse, came to the Philadelphia cathedral service to pray that Vianney would intercede not only for her but for members of the priesthood in a time when they are struggling. Relics are a way of connecting believers in a physical way to the saints, she said. "If you call upon them, they will be there, if your heart is really open, giving them respect and veneration."

Sowa went on to relate stories of events that had occurred while in prayer before a relic. She has a relic of her own, she says, found in a thrift store, and has shared it

with others in need.

The veneration of relics can be traced to the early church. Robin Jensen, a theology professor at the University of Notre Dame, is writing a book about the emerging prominence of relics in the fourth century. She admits that she still doesn't have a working hypothesis to explain why it happened, but she thinks the number of people recounting miracles that happened in the presence of relics played a part in sparking the movement. "It's pretty clear that this was a kind of a dramatic shift in Christian practice," she said.

Tradition has it that in the late fourth century, Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, went to Jerusalem and found the cross on which Jesus had been crucified. By the end of the fourth century, people were going to Jerusalem to venerate it.

As veneration of relics began to flourish, controversy and proscriptions followed, involving church fathers such as Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, Jensen noted. Wanting to be close to the saints is "a big part of Catholic devotional piety. It's not a world where only Jesus is at the top and we are at the bottom. There's a lot of in-between."

After all, she said, Christians of all varieties, whether or not they pray for the help of saints or venerate relics, are drawn to the concrete places where tradition says Jesus lived, feeling themselves to be in the presence of the holy.

Relics became less prominent in the liturgical renewal that followed Vatican II, according to John Thavis, author of *The Vatican Prophecies: Investigating Supernatural Signs, Apparitions and Miracles in the Modern Age*.

They saw a resurgence when Pope John Paul II began to canonize numerous saints. Along with each saint came new relics and, in the 1990s, new instructions from Rome on how they were created, authenticated, and used, Thavis wrote in an email. Moving to quash a brisk online trade in relics, the Vatican in 2017 issued rules that forbid selling them in online auctions or using them in blasphemous rituals. It also mandated that anyone who might be considering unearthing a body get permission from the family of the candidate for sainthood.

The recent guidelines "confirm a recent trend away from corporeal relics, ruling out 'dismemberment' of saints' corpses without specific permission from Vatican

officials,” Thavis wrote. “Today, the Vatican sees a piece of clothing, not a body part, as a proper relic. That’s quite a change from earlier centuries, when saints’ bones were literally sawed into tiny pieces and distributed to the faithful. In the 1500s, for example, the priest exhuming the body of Saint Teresa of Ávila took one of the fingers from her corpse and wore it around his neck for the rest of his life.”

In the popular mind, relics often have a more personal and supernatural significance. Christians have prayed before relics and asked for healing or miraculous favors, convinced that the bone of a saint may serve as a portal to the divine. Vatican officials continually caution against the concept of “magical powers” of relics, but it seems impossible to eliminate these popular beliefs.

One Catholic priest chose to use a metaphor that would be familiar to anyone who has prayed for a connection to the divine. Relics are akin to family photographs or a piece of jewelry that reminds us of a loved one now gone, said George Schommer, pastor of St. Patrick’s Church in Philadelphia.

“We want to be able to see somebody, we want to be able to touch something that belonged to them,” he said. “Relics are a way for us to connect with the saints of God, with their lives and their memory. It’s very tangible and very incarnational.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What do relics mean to believers today?”