

Catholic relics and papal remains

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

When Vatican officials announced recently that Pope Benedict XVI's 2005 election rendered his organ donor card null and void, they offered no specific reason for the change. The curious history of papal body parts, however, offers some clues. "A decision of a personal character made when [Benedict] was a private citizen is no longer operative now that he is the head of the Catholic Church," said the Vatican's chief spokesman, Federico Lombardi. He also called the idea of transplanting the organs of a man who is almost 84 "a little surreal."

Lombardi

dismissed reports that the church preserves a dead pope's body in order to supply holy relics in case he's declared a saint. But Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, head of the Vatican's health care office, told an Italian newspaper that one reason to keep papal remains intact would be for "possible future veneration."

Since Benedict's five predecessors are under formal consideration for sainthood, it's not a huge stretch to see Benedict as a possible saint-in-waiting. And where there's a saint, there are often bodily relics to be venerated by the faithful. Generally speaking—at least in modern times—the church prefers that the relics all be in one place.

Pope John Paul II, who will be beatified on May 1, is drawing as much attention in death as he did in life. A vial of his blood, taken during a medical examination in his last days, will be placed in the altar of a church near Krakow, Poland, later this year.

John Paul's tomb in the grottoes under St.

Peter's Basilica boosted pilgrim traffic from just a few hundred to as many as 18,000 per day. To accommodate the even bigger crowds

anticipated once John Paul is beatified, the Vatican is moving his body to a more accessible chapel upstairs in the basilica itself.

The

body of Pope John XXIII, who died in 1963 and, like John Paul, is one step away from sainthood, was placed in a glass coffin and moved upstairs in 2001; his intact embalmed body was found to be "incorrupt," or free from decay.

The burial place of the martyred St. Peter, traditionally considered the first pope, determined the site of the basilica that bears his name. In 1968, Pope Paul VI announced that the bones of a man found buried under the basilica were in fact Peter's.

The

most perverse tribute to the importance of papal remains came in the ninth century, when a successor of Pope Formosus (891-896) exhumed his nine-months-dead body and put it on trial for perjury and other crimes.

As Notre Dame scholar Richard P. McBrien recounts in *Lives of the Popes*, Formosus's cadaver was "propped up on a throne in full pontifical vestments" for the trial, and after his conviction "three fingers of his right hand (by which he swore oaths and gave blessings) were cut off." His body was thrown into the Tiber River but recovered by a hermit and eventually reburied with honors by a later pope.