

CONTROVERSY

Relics donated to King Charles by Pope is not ecumenism

ECCLESIA

02_05_2023



**Ermes
Dovico**



Pope Francis recently donated two fragments of the True Cross to King Charles III, "as an ecumenical gesture on the occasion of the centenary of the Anglican Church in Wales": this is what the Holy See press office **reported**. The sovereign - who is also the head of

the Church of England resulting from the schism caused by Henry VIII - ordered the precious relic to then be incorporated into the "Cross of Wales". The prestigious cross will be at the head of the King's Coronation procession on May 6 and also reflects the "sustainability" so dear to Charles III.

As this is not the first time that Pope Bergoglio has donated relics, for declared ecumenical purposes, it is worthwhile to reflect on the meaning of this gesture, also in the light of the current ecclesial context. But, in order to understand how these donations should be considered, it's necessary to first take a step back in history.

Over the centuries, relics have enjoyed particular veneration. From antiquity and the Middle Ages we have countless examples testifying to the great importance attached, first of all, to objects relating to the earthly life of Jesus and Our Lady and, secondly, to the mortal remains of saints and blessed. It is no coincidence that, after the Church (heavily persecuted in its first three centuries) finally acquired freedom of worship in the Roman Empire, the basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul were erected precisely on the tombs of the two apostles, martyred under Nero. In the same century, the 4th, in Milan, St Ambrose gave great impetus to the veneration of relics, culminating in the discovery of the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, a fact that helped the city's Catholics in their cause against the Arians.

As for the Middle Ages, the events surrounding St Nicholas are famous. In 1087, the people of Bari organised an expedition of over sixty sailors to rescue his relics, kept in the cathedral of Myra, a city that had been conquered by the Muslims. And a few years later, the Venetians would complete the task, recovering the smaller bone fragments of St Nicholas, kept in another room of the same cathedral. Also worth mentioning is St Louis IX, the devout French king who spent a fortune to acquire from Baldwin II of Constantinople some relics of the Passion of Jesus, first of all the Crown of Thorns, then the Holy Sponge, a part of the True Cross and of the Holy Lance. To worthily guard them, he built the Sainte-Chapelle, a splendid example of Gothic architecture.

And one could go on with many other cases. The relics not infrequently ended up at the centre of disputes (above all, that over the remains of St. Anthony), such was the dignity that was acknowledged to them. This was evidently accompanied by a genuine piety, which is in no way affected by certain abuses, such as the trade and forgery of the relics themselves, since - as the ancient maxim goes - abuse does not exclude use.

Returning to today, this is not the first time - as already mentioned - that Pope Francis has donated relics to other Christian denominations, not in communion with the

Catholic Church. It had already happened with some **remains of St Francis** donated to Kirill for his 70th birthday, after receiving from the Patriarch of Moscow some relics of Seraphim of Sarov, venerated by the Orthodox; with the **nine bone fragments of St Peter** donated to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew; the **relics of St Clement and St Potitus** to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; the **relic of St Thomas the Apostle** to the Assyrian Church of the East. All class I relics and, in the last case in order of time, among the most important of all, being linked to the Passion of Our Lord. Donations that have caused the Argentinean pontiff to speak of a true "ecumenism of relics".

Similar donations can also be found in previous pontificates. We recall that in 1964, as a sign of openness towards the Greek Orthodox Church, **Paul VI** handed over the sacred head of St Andrew, which was brought back to Patras, the city where the apostle had suffered martyrdom. Forty years later, **John Paul II** donated some relics of Saints John Chrysostom and Gregory Nazianzen to the Patriarch of Constantinople "in the desire to journey together towards the full and visible union that Christ wills for his disciples". Gestures that went in the direction of re-establishing a dialogue with the Orthodox world, after almost a millennium of schism.

If it is true that Francis wants to continue on the path of unity, it is equally true that donations of relics have become quite frequent during his pontificate, far more than in his predecessors. And this creates questions among the faithful. On the one hand, relics can be means of reconciliation and God's providence, which also writes on crooked lines, and can be useful in this sense; but the fact remains that holy things require prudence, and unity can only be achieved if people have, first of all, the will to adhere to the truth. If the event of donated relics - from being an exception - becomes, so to speak, the 'norm', there is a risk of losing sight of its meaning, with a trivialising effect. "I have no difficulty in believing that the collection of relics is quite large, but with respect to the number of these donations, one could ask the question: is it because we have an abundance of them or because little importance is given to the relics themselves?" asks Fr Nicola Bux (theologian).

Generally speaking, the theologian notes that with the liturgical reform and the post-Council period, relics have experienced a downwards parabola, often due to the historicist approach that has taken root in more ecclesial circles. "Revisionism about fake relics has 'swept away', here and there, even the authentic ones". Due distinctions remain in this trend, such as the fact that relics that are highly symbolic for a city "are jealously guarded".

At the liturgical level, the General Ordinance of the Roman Missal still preserves

an ancient practice and at n. 302 prescribes: "The custom of depositing the relics of saints, even if not martyrs, under the altar to be dedicated should be maintained. However, care should be taken to verify the authenticity of such relics". A practice, the one that links relics and altars, that has its roots in the first Christian centuries and has a relevant biblical foundation in the Apocalypse: "When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who were immolated because of the word of God and the testimony they had given him" (Rev 6:9). Hence the presence of relics in the celebrations, because, as Fr Bux explains, "in ancient times, the liturgy was seen as a mimesis of the heavenly one".

With respect to the ecumenical intention, the theologian then observes that the donation of relics to Charles III is placed on a different plane with respect to those to the Orthodox "because the rites (above all the Mass) and ordinations of the Anglicans are not valid, while those of the Orthodox are valid, even if they are not legitimate, lacking communion with Rome".

The donation to the Anglicans came at the same time as the [St John Lateran case](#), which caused a liturgical scandal. Regardless of what one thinks about the episode in the *Mother and Head of all Churches*, the question remains as to what criteria guide donations of relics and other gestures with ecumenical significance. "What kind of ecumenism do we want to achieve?" asks Fr Bux: "If the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has been disowned by a large part of the Anglican community over the issue of blessings to gay couples, does the Catholic Church have nothing to say? The unity of the Church must be built on truth. What is coming from Anglicans, Africans, and others, should be a wake-up call for the Church as well, because not even the Catholic communities in Africa tolerate certain ideologies".