

## The online relic trading

(4 May 2025)

During the current Jubilee Year, there is a disturbing trend: a surge in the online trade of relics, both genuine and purported. This illicit market, rife with ambiguity and potential fraud, has raised serious concerns within the Church.

A charge pressed against unknown suspect at the Prosecutor's Office in Perugia by Monsignor Domenico Sorrentino, Bishop of the Diocese of Assisi – Nocera Umbra – Gualdo Tadino, has highlighted a particular case which is far from being an isolated incident: the online commerce of sacred relics.

A “relic reliquary” of Blessed Carlo Acutis, described as “ex capillis with certificate”, was listed on a popular website, an auction that had already attracted numerous bids, pushing the price to €2,110.

This referred to a lock of hair from Carlo Acutis, who died at the age of 15 from acute leukaemia and was beatified in Assisi on 10th October 2020. His profound passion for computer science enabled him to spread and bear witness to his faith online, as well as to design and create an exhibition on Eucharistic miracles worldwide. Monsignor Sorrentino, questioning the authenticity of the alleged relic – which, according to the listing, came with a certificate of authenticity – requested its seizure for verification.

The relic of Blessed Carlo Acutis is by no means the only one circulating online. The internet appears saturated with sacred memorabilia. Bones attributed to Saint Nicholas of Bari or Padre Pio, a cushion claimed to have touched the body of Saint Rose, the supposed blood of Christ, a fragment of the Cross of Saint Peter – these are just a few examples from a burgeoning online marketplace.

In addition to general websites where virtually anything can be sold, dedicated e-commerce platforms have emerged, specialising in the sale of religious items, where relics – including extremely rare ones – are auctioned daily. The prices are far from negligible, ranging from €120 for a relic of Saint Pius X to nearly €5,000 for one of Padre Pio. The relics on offer, accompanied by detailed descriptions, are generally claimed to be authentic and come with certificates of authenticity. However, it's crucial to emphasise that such authenticity is rarely guaranteed. While a genuine relic should bear a wax seal and a certificate, these can be skilfully forged.

From the perspective of Italian law, the offence in question could be fraud (art. 640, of the Criminal Code). As it is a crime prosecutable only upon complaint, it is up to the defrauded buyer to press a charge (unless an aggravating circumstance as provided for in Article 640, paragraph 2, points 1, 2, and 2-bis applies).

From the perspective of the law of the Catholic Church, the Code of Canon Law explicitly prohibits the commercialisation of relics, as laid out in Canon 1190, which states:

*«§ 1. It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics.*

*§ 2. Notable relics, as well as those honoured with great popular devotion, may not be validly alienated in any way or transferred permanently without permission from the Apostolic See.*

*§ 3. The provision of §2 also applies to images venerated with great popular devotion in any church».*

This prohibition is further reinforced in Article 25 of the Instruction “Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation”, issued by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints on 16th December 2017. The innovation introduced by the Instruction lies in its dual prohibition regarding relics: the *commerce*, meaning the «exchange of a relic for something else or for money», but also the *sale*, that is «the cessation of ownership of a relic for a corresponding price». Furthermore, it is absolutely forbidden «their display in profane or unauthorized places». Naturally, the ban includes online transactions.

The 2017 Instruction, divided into three parts, also clarifies the duties, responsibilities, and procedures for the management and preservation of relics. In particular, it outlines canonical recognition procedures, the collection of fragments, the preparation of relics, the transfer of urns, the alienation of relics, and their use in pilgrimages.

The trade in relics, however, has deep and ancient roots. It has long been believed that possessing the remains of saints or of Christ himself had healing or spiritual powers. Over the course of history, this belief has contributed to the circulation – both authentic and counterfeit – of a vast number of relics, fuelling the growth of this market and, simultaneously, the number of frauds.

There can be no certainty behind the online listings, yet many deeply “devout” believers or eccentric collectors, by paying exorbitant prices, continue to hope they are acquiring unique relics – for the sake of their souls or their collections.

«An offence to religious sentiment!», was Monsignor Sorrentino’s comment.

**Francesco Nigido**