

## **Is it true that there are relics in every altar?**

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a document entitled: “Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship”. It makes the following statement:

“In the Church's history and tradition, the altar was often placed over the tombs of the saints or the relics of saints were deposited beneath the altar. The presence of relics of saints in the altar provides a witness to the Church's belief that the Eucharist celebrated on the altar is the source of the grace that won sanctity for the saints. The custom of placing small relics of martyrs or other saints in an altar stone and setting this in the mensa (the flat stone forming the top of the altar) has changed since the Second Vatican Council. Relics of martyrs or other saints may be placed *beneath* the altar, as long as the relics are of a size sufficient for them to be recognizable as parts of a human body and that they are of undoubted authenticity. Relics are no longer placed *on* the altar or set into the mensa in an altar stone.”

We see the requirements have changed for new altars dedicated since Vatican II. The larger size now required, with the demand for authenticity, limits the availability of suitable relics, especially of martyrs. The Ceremonial of Bishops states that “it is better for an altar to be dedicated without relics than to have relics of doubtful authenticity”. Most old altars, in churches dedicated before Vatican II, will have small relics, maybe a bone chip, contained within the altar. Many newer churches will have relics beneath the altar, or none at all. It is important to note, that in either case, these relics are not necessarily from the patron saint for whom the church is named. This is obvious for a parish such as ours which is named after Jesus Himself.

Our church building was dedicated after Vatican II, but our altar does contain relics. Does anyone know if our altar was relocated from the previous building? Does anyone know, perchance, what relics are in our altar? (I called the archives at the Archdiocese and they did not know.) If you have any historical information, let me know and I will pass it along.

**Deacon Joe**