

## **Relic Tour – FAQs**

### ***What is a relic?***

A relic is a physical object associated with a saint, such as a bone or a piece of clothing belonging to the saint.

Relics are divided into three classes. First class relics are physical artifacts from the saint's body, usually bone or bone fragments; second class relics are items that belonged to or were used by the saint, such clothing or books; third class relics are items, such as a rosary, a piece of cloth, or prayer card, that have been touched to a first or second class relic.

### ***Why do Catholics honour relics?***

Nearly every human being cherishes objects that link us to dearest family members or ancestors. People keep physical mementos, pictures, a lock of hair, even funeral urns to connect us to those we love. Catholics have always honored the relics of the saints as spiritual heirlooms, and, moreover, believe that relics are “sacramentals”, or holy objects that are vessels for special graces and blessings.

### ***Is there a basis for devotion to relics in the scriptures?***

Since the times of the early church, Christians experienced the bones of their dead brothers and sisters were occasions of miraculous healing. This was no surprise to them, since from the times of the Old Testament bones of the dead were venerated. Moses carried the bones of Joseph out of Egypt (Exodus 13:19). Men placed a dead man into the tomb of Elisha and the dead man came to life when he touched the bones of the prophet (2 Kings 13:21). In the New Testament, people touched cloth to St. Paul's hands, then they touched that cloth to the sick and they were healed (Acts 19:11). St. Ambrose and St. Augustine wrote about personally witnessing miracles after a martyr's relic touched a sick man.

### ***What are the relics of the Canadian Martyrs?***

The major relics of the Canadian Martyrs include the skull of St. Jean de Brébeuf and bones of St. Gabriel Lalement and St. Charles Garnier. Of the eight martyrs they are the only three of whom relics exist. They are kept at the National Shrine to the Canadian Martyrs, located in Midland, Ontario, which is visited by over 100,000 pilgrims each year. This is the first time the relics have left the Shrine to go to Western Canada.

### ***Who were the Canadian or North American Martyrs?***

The Canadian Martyrs were six French Jesuit priests and two lay companions, who lived and worked among the Wendat or Huron people in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Five of them were martyred in the region known as Huronia or Wendake, near the present-day Georgian Bay in Ontario, and three were martyred while in the country of the Iroquois, on the south shore of Lake Ontario. They were beatified (declared “blesseds”) in 1925, canonized saints of the Catholic Church in 1930, and declared the co-patrons of Canada in 1940. They are to date the only canonized martyrs of North America.

### ***Who was St. Jean de Brébeuf?***

The most well-known of the Canadian Martyrs is St. Jean de Brébeuf, who came to Canada in 1625, and lived in Wendake or “Huronie” for nearly 25 years. Known for his gentleness, kindness and strength, he quickly earned the friendship of the Wendat, and was especially close to the bear clan. He was the first European to learn the Wendat language, wrote a French-Wendat dictionary, and composed Canada’s first Christmas hymn, “The Huron Carol”. A mystic with a deep prayer life, Brébeuf had dreams and visions of a cross in the sky. During the 1649 invasion of Huronia by the Iroquois, the enemies of the Wendat, Brébeuf was captured with his companion St. Gabriel Lalement on March 16, 1649, ritually tortured and killed. Their bodies were recovered by the Jesuits a few days later and brought back to the mission of Sainte-Marie, which is how the relics were preserved.

### ***Did any of the Wendat (Hurons) also give their lives as martyrs for their faith?***

Although they are not officially canonized, the holy character and sincerity of faith of the Wendat Martyrs of Huronia is without dispute. Several Wendat were killed at the same time as Brébeuf and Lalement, and are recorded professing their faith until the end. Joseph Chiwatenhwa was the first indigenous person to do the “The Spiritual Exercises”, the silent retreat written by Jesuit founder St. Ignatius of Loyola, and was among the first to ask for baptism. He and his wife Aonnetta were Canada’s first catechists and lay church leaders. He was called “the apostle with the apostles” by St. Marie de “l’Incarnation in Quebec. Joseph helped prepare the conversions of nearly 3,000 of his own people and was killed in a field near his village on August 2, 1640. Pope John Paul II said Joseph and his family “lived and witnessed to their faith in a heroic manner.” There is interest in promoting their eventual canonization.

### ***Who was St. Kateri Tekakwitha?***

St. Kateri, informally known as “the lily of the Mohawks”, was born in 1656 to an Algonquin mother and Mohawk (Iroquois) chief in the village of Ossernenon in present-day upstate New York. She lost most of her family to a smallpox epidemic, and herself recovered with scars left on her face. At the age of 18 she met the Jesuit priest Jacques de Lamberville,

and shared with him her desire for baptism, which she took a year later. After undergoing harassment in her village, she moved to the Christian Mohawk village of Kahnawake (south shore of present-day Montreal). She took a vow of virginity and devoted herself to prayer and to helping the people around her. She struggled with poor health, and when she died on April 17, 1680 at the age of 23 or 24, her last witnessed words were “Jesus, Mary, I love you.” She purportedly appeared to three individuals after her death. More than 300 books have been written about her extraordinary life. She was beatified in 1980 and canonized in 2012. St. Kateri is the first indigenous person to be canonized a saints of Catholic Church and is venerated in First Nations peoples across North America.

### ***What is Martyrs’ Shrine?***

The national shrine to the Canadian Martyrs is the custodian of the major relics of the Canadian Martyrs, and is located in Midland, Ontario, a two-hour drive north of Toronto. It is served by the Jesuits of Canada since it was built in 1925 and opened in 1926. Millions of people have visited the shrine over the decades. In 2026 the shrine will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Many healings have been reported and documented. More than 35 ethnic and cultural pilgrimage events take place each summer. Week-long walking pilgrimages are organized from Toronto and other locations. Many youth and young adult groups visit the shrine each summer. Pope John Paul II made a historic visit to the shrine on September 15, 1984. The shrine is open to the public only six months of the year (May to October). Next to Martyrs’ Shrine is the “living museum” Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, a reconstruction of the original mission and a National Historic Site of Canada. It is operated by the government of Ontario.

### ***Who are the Jesuits?***

The Jesuits, or The Society of Jesus, is a religious order founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola and his companions in 1540 to serve the needs of the Church. Members take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Numbering around 14,000, Jesuits are found in 112 countries. In Canada, around 200 Jesuit priests and brothers work from coast to coast, engaged in evangelization and pastoral ministry, in education and research, work in hospitals and conduct retreats. They also do social and humanitarian aid throughout the world.

### ***Why do a relic tour?***

2025 is a Jubilee Year or Holy Year for the Catholic Church, which ordinarily happens only every 25 years. A Holy Year is special time for the forgiveness of debts, of reconciliation and restoration of relationships, and of special graces for the lives of individuals. Martyrs’ Shrine is an official pilgrimage destination for the Holy Year, but is only accessible to those who can travel there. The purpose of the relic tour is to bring the relics to places where people might not easily travel to the Shrine.

2025 is also the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Jean de Brébeuf's arrival in Canada (1625).

***Is there a connection to the Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada?***

There is no formal connection, but there is a desire for more prayer and intercession for the ongoing process of reconciliation, of repairing relations between Canada's indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. 2025 marks ten years since the historic TRC report was issued with its recommendations. We believe that true healing can come not from our power alone, but with the help of heaven and the saints who continue to work for the good of the world. Since the Canadian Martyrs loved the Indigenous people so greatly and gave their lives for them and with them, they are fitting saints to pray to for this intention. St. Kateri is the patron saint of indigenous people (and of ecological integrity), and her love for others and for her faith makes her also a fitting saint for this purpose.

***What does a visitor do at a relic event?***

People will have the opportunity to spend a few moments before the relics in personal prayer. They can bring their written prayer intentions, touch them to the reliquaries, and leave them in a basket, and these will later be brought back to the Shrine. People can also press their holy cards to the relics and bring the home with them as spiritual mementos (and third-class relics). There may also be the celebration of Mass, the sacrament of reconciliation, and music.

The relic tour will visit Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, St. Paul, Regina, and Winnipeg. For more info on the relic tour, see [www.martyrs-shrine.com](http://www.martyrs-shrine.com), or contact:

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