

# Of Holy Memory: Relics of the Passion of the Christ

Geraldine M. Rohling, Ph.D., M.A.Ed  
Archivist-Curator

There is an old saying among the rabbis: “To remember is to give life.” The narration and recalling of memories is essential to both the human and the faith experiences. Each year during Triduum we participate in a storied observance of our salvation. Like the Passover celebration of our Jewish ancestors, we tell and re-tell stories of faith, tradition, and heritage; we remember God’s salvation to us, to our forebears, and that which is promised to our descendants. Sacred Scripture is the basis for all that we believe and all that we celebrate; it forms us, instructs us, and most importantly, defines us. Sacred Scripture is our official shared memory.

Individuals are initiated into the faith community, in part, through the acceptance of Sacred Scripture. This is most eloquently expressed in the Rite of Acceptance, the first of the “threshold rites” for the initiation of adults into the Catholic Church. The “inquirers,” welcomed publicly and officially, become Catechumens. They are marked with the sign of the Cross and they are given a personal copy of Sacred Scripture to be read during the period of preparation and throughout their pilgrimage as a Christian.

In biblical narratives we are told that “remembering” is central to the faith. Never is this more relevant than at the celebration of his last Passover meal when Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me.” Thus, Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of the Church (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). This does not exclude however, popular pious practices, the simple and heartfelt “expression of a profound faith” (Pope Francis, 12 July 2015). One of the earliest known forms of popular piety — perhaps the first — is the veneration of relics.



Fractio panis

A *relic* is a particle of the physical “remains” of a holy person (Latin, *reliquiae*, pl.). It can also be a particle of an object owned or used by that person; something that came into close contact

with that person such as garments or articles of clothing. In the case of a martyr, it includes the instruments of their torment and death.

The relics of the passion, death, and burial of Jesus are the “first” relics of the Church. They are “the most precious evidence of the Passion or Our Lord,” (Amalric I, Christian king of Jerusalem, 12th C) and are the most esteemed and venerated of all relics. The desire to walk the paths that Jesus had trod in his life, to touch the objects of his passion and death, and to offer canticles of praise and thanksgiving at the site of the Holy Sepulchre, the empty tomb, were the catalyst for the pilgrimage practice.



Jesus is nailed to the Cross

The earliest extant written account of a Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem is that of Egeria, a woman, possibly a nun, who lived in Galicia (modern day Spain), the western part of the Roman Empire, during the fourth century. In her journal, Egeria tells of Holy Week rituals that included the reading of selections from the Passion narrative and other appropriate portions of Scripture, the singing of psalms, the recitation of prayers at each station, and the veneration of the relics of Our Lord. The following excerpt tells of an open air service on Good Friday, in the afternoon, at Golgotha (Calvary).

*Then a chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha behind the Cross, which is now standing; the bishop duly takes his seat in the chair, and a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him ... a silver-gilt casket is brought in which is the holy wood of the Cross ... both the wood of the Cross and the title are [taken out and] placed upon the table.... the bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands ... [the] faithful and catechumens come one by one ... [they bow and] touch the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes; then they kiss the Cross. (Translation by M. L. McClure and C. L. Feltoe, 1919).*

**Veneration of the Cross** was a physical, tangible act of remembrance. Pressing the forehead to the wood of the cross signified the binding of the death of Christ to the memory of the individual and to the community. It was a public witness to a holy memory that transcended time. The profundity of the moment exceeds human comprehension; it can only be understood in “Spirit and truth” (John 4: 24).



Jesus dies on the Cross

In his final hours, Jesus promised his followers a divine Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Not only would the Spirit of God teach them, but the Spirit would also *remind* them of all that Jesus had taught them. “I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you” (John 14: 25-26). The Spirit of God is the bearer of holy memory, a storyteller. The Spirit calls us to remember who we are and what we believe. It is the Spirit of God that calls us to holy remembrance. A ceramic medallion of the Holy Spirit and the four evangelists hovers above the main altar in the Crypt Church.



God the Holy Spirit

The veneration of relics, as stipulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), is an acceptable form of devotion and piety. Veneration of relics, visits to shrines, pilgrimages, processions, and the Stations of the Cross are forms of piety in which religious belief finds a form of expression that surrounds the sacramental life of the Church (CCC, 1674). These expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church but do not replace it. Derived from the liturgy, they are to “harmonize with the liturgical seasons” and lead the faithful back to the liturgy (CCC, 1675).

The National Shrine is a pilgrimage church and as such, it maintains a treasury of relics and reliquaries, which include those of Jesus Christ and of his Passion: Table of the Lord’s Supper; Stone from the Garden of Gethsemane; Scourging

Pillar; Purple Garment; Crown of Thorns; Stone from Golgotha (Calvary); Seamless White Tunic; shavings of the Spike or Nails; Sponge filled with vinegar (sour wine) and the Reed; the Lance; Burial Cloths and Bindings; Stone from the Holy Sepulchre; and the True Cross. The National Shrine also preserves relics of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the women who stood with her at the foot of the Cross: Mary of Magdala, Mary, wife of Clopas, sister of the Blessed Mother. In addition, relics of the Apostles and Saint Paul are also preserved.



Jesus is laid in the tomb

In summation then, consider the following account of Saint Gertrude the Great, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. “As the saint ardently desired to have some relics of the wood of the Cross, that our Lord might look on her with more love, He said to her: ‘If you desire to have relics which will draw my Heart into yours, read My Passion, and meditate attentively on every word contained therein, and it will be to you a true relic, which will merit more grace for you than any other; and if you are not persuaded of this ... Remember what I did or said for you ... thence you may know and be assured that the words which I uttered when on earth are the most precious relics which you can possess.’” (*The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude*, 1865, p. 460).

The relics of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are links to a holy memory; a threshold to a spiritual encounter within the Word of God. To the faithful, to those who meditate on the Word of God, a relic is as flint on stone, igniting the faith.

In the early Church, the veneration of the relics of the suffering and death of Our Lord was central to the observances of Holy Week and the practice of pilgrimage. On Good Friday, 14 April 2017, the National Shrine will observe Exposition of the Relics of the Passion of Our Lord 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. in the Crypt Church. The faithful are invited to come, to venerate the holy relics, and to spend time in holy meditation of Sacred Scripture. ☪

*\* All of the images in this article are works of art found in the Crypt Church, the heart of the National Shrine. They draw upon Sacred Scripture and the writings of the early Church. Photographs by Geraldine M. Rohling*

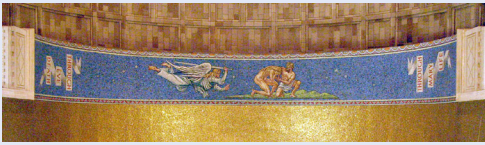


# Behold the Wood

Geraldine M. Rohling, Ph.D., M.A.Ed  
Archivist-Curator

There is an ancient belief that when pious people sit and tell holy stories, God comes to listen. (cf. Malachi 3:16). Pious stories were an important means of communicating faith and spirituality. Even today, they have an appeal and a talent that is without equal.

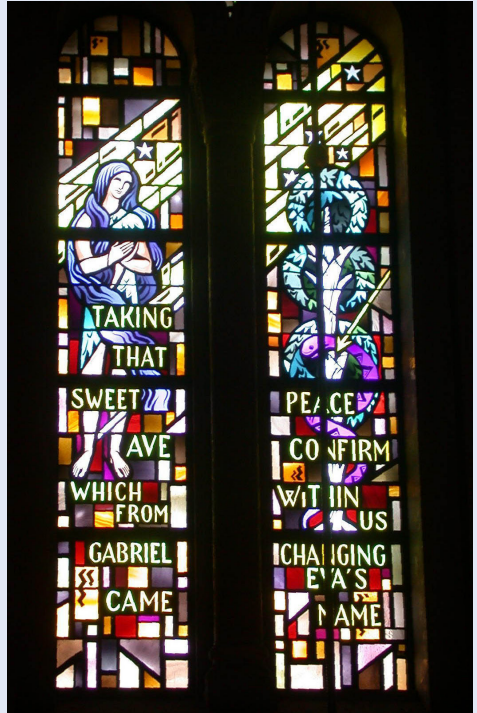
The wood of the True Cross is one of the oldest Christian relics. When the news of this “find” had spread, the questions began. What type of tree was it? From where did it come? How did the tree grow? Who cut it down? Was the tree cursed? In an effort to answer these and many other questions, pious stories and songs began to wind their way into the catechesis of the faithful. The most popular were based on the story of the “Expulsion from Eden” (cf. Genesis 3) and the apocryphal years that followed.



Expulsion from Eden

In the waning days of his life, it was said that Adam called his son Seth (“another offspring in place of Abel,” Genesis 4: 25) to his side, asking him to go to the gates of the Garden of Eden and beg the LORD for drops of the oil of mercy, which had been distilled from the Tree of life. Seth found his way to the gates by following the footprints of his parents, as no grass had grown in those spots since they were banished. Upon his arrival at the gates, Michael the Archangel approached and told Seth that he could not receive this oil until 5,500 years had passed, at which time the merciful Son of God would come to earth to save all who had died. This number referred to the number of years from the creation of Adam to the birth of Jesus. The basis for this calculation is heard in the Christmas Proclamation, *The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, from the *Roman Martyrology*. It draws upon events in Sacred Scripture and the world to calculate the birth of Jesus.

So Michael gave Seth three seeds from the tree of mercy (Tree of Knowledge). When Adam died, Seth placed the seeds beneath the tongue of his father before burying him. From these three seeds sprang a “trinity of trees” united in one trunk but of three separate woods: cedar, cypress, and pine. It is said that Moses cut his rod from this tree and David composed his psalms beneath its boughs. Solomon used the wood in the Temple before cutting down the tree and



Tree of Life

burying it where the pool of Bethesda was dug in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate. There, the guardian angel of the tree would trouble the waters at certain times of the year and those who dipped into the waters were cured (cf. John 5: 1-9). As the days of the passion of Jesus drew nigh, the wood floated to the surface of the pool. It was from this timber that the soldiers made the Cross. After the crucifixion, the Cross was buried on or near Golgotha, as was the custom, until the days of Saint Helena.



First Sorrowful Mystery Chapel

It is this account of which we sing on Good Friday: “*Eating of the tree forbidden, man had sunk in Satan’s snare, when our pitying Creator did this second tree prepare; destined, many ages later, that first evil to repair.*”

Tucked away in the Great Upper Church the three works of art shown here look to Genesis 3, the “new Eve,” and the “second tree” for their inspiration. 🍷