

Don Bosco Relics: What are we seeing?

The word has been out for a long time, and published in many devotional magazines and websites, that Don Bosco is one of the “incurruptibles”. This report is not entirely accurate. We can say that Don Bosco was one of the incurruptibles – but science made a few mistakes.

When the tomb of Don Bosco was opened in 1929 just before the beatification, according to the prescribed procedures of canon law for the beatification process, the body was found to be intact. However, 41 years after the servant of God’s death, the skin had darkened somewhat. The plan was to bring the body of the Blessed, carried in a glass urn from Valsalice to Valdocco, for the festivities at the time of the beatification.

At the time, scientists and doctors discussed doing something to lighten the skin. When they applied the chemical formula that they had devised, there was a reaction that they did not anticipate. The body corrupted almost before their eyes.



The body was then covered with a wax image so that the festivities might take place, and the Blessed’s remains could be placed within the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin (*Maria Ausliatrice*).

The image was cracked open again at the time of the canonization in 1934, and the corruption was considerable. A new casing was created, and the remains were encased within them.

In 2006 a major renovation project took place on the Basilica. Don Bosco’s altar was dismantled for the renovations. This time two identical replicas of the saint’s body were made in fiberglass. Each item of bone and tissue was identified and placed within the first replica. This fiberglass replica was placed within the glass urn above Don Bosco’s altar where Don Bosco’s remains have been venerated since 1934. It was determined that inside the second replica, the right hand and arm should be placed for the pilgrim journey. However, very quickly it became obvious that in some countries (notably India), the depiction of a saint in death would create more consternation than devotion. Thus, a third reliquary was designed. This is an image of Don Bosco who is standing and surrounded by young people.

With these reliquaries complete, the relics of the right hand and right forearm were identified, certified, and put inside two silver plated boxes that were in turn sealed according to the norms of the Church regarding relics. This sealed box with the hand was placed inside the chest cavity of the fiberglass statue of the saint in repose; the sealed box with the right forearm was placed with the statue of Don Bosco standing among his boys.

The latter image and relics are bound for India and Australia; the former image and relics have already begun the journey in the West.

The statue of Don Bosco in repose, then, is itself a reliquary. This is the image that concerns us because this is the reliquary that will soon arrive in California. It is dressed in authentic vestments, with a chasuble of the era. The cassock shoes and other garments were newly made, but according to the patterns that were in use at the time of Don Bosco's death.



There have been some talk in the Catholic Press in the USA that what is coming is a wax replica of Don Bosco's relics. This information is not correct. The relics are actually being brought and they are within the statue... again, the right hand and arm were designated for the pilgrim journey, since this is the hand of blessing, the hand of baptizing, the hand of absolution, the hand of giving communion... and the hand that Don Bosco favored when he wrote, when he taught tailoring, and carpentry, and shoemaking and bricklaying.

All the rest of the remains of the saint are encased within the first statue, in a glass urn above the altar of Don Bosco in the basilica of Maria Ausiliatrice, as they have been since 1934 – but carefully catalogued in a reliquary that is refurbished, in a church that is restored.

Hopefully this clarifies some of the issues surround this event. God willing I shall accompany the relics throughout the journey in California. I will be very glad to meet with anyone who may have questions in any of the places where the celebrations for the youth and for Don Bosco will be held.

Sincerely,

Fr Joe Boenzi, SDB

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