Opinion
NCR Voices



Dominican friars look on while people venerate what is believed to be the skull of St. Thomas Aquinas Nov. 30 in the chapel at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington. (NCR photo/ Carol Zimmermann)



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When I heard that the skull of St. Thomas Aquinas was coming to several cities in the Eastern United States in the next few weeks, I knew I had to see it.

If the relic of the renowned Dominican friar, who died 750 years ago, could travel 4,000 miles from its resting place in Toulouse, France, where his order was founded, I could certainly make the 29-mile pilgrimage from my Maryland home to one of its stops in Washington, D.C. Plus, the visit had the added appeal of being so uniquely Catholic.

Relics have been part of the church's tradition since its beginning, when the early Christians would make pilgrimages to pray before the bone, or even the fragment of the bone, of a holy person.

The thought has been that a relic is something tangible, a part of someone who was close to God thus connecting the person — essentially paying respects to it in some small way — to God. But the idea of relics in today's modern world is a little hard to wrap one's head around, so to speak, and the macabre quality about them is also hard to explain.

Relics' draw might fall under the category of the quote that is often attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas: "To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

With this on my mind and after a quick skim of the saint's famous tome *Summa Theologiae* — which endeavors to explain man's relationship with God and how faith and reason work together — I made my way to the skull's second veneration stop: the Dominican House of Studies in Washington.

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I had also read that there are actually two skulls of St. Thomas Aquinas that church officials claim to be true, the one from Toulouse now on tour and one in Priverno, Italy, near where the saint died. Both skulls are pending DNA testing.

But it seemed there was no asterisk around this relic saying it was purported to be the saint's actual bone.

While I was en route to see it, two days after Thanksgiving, I wondered what if the relic traveled all this way and no one came to see it? But once I saw the line outside the Dominicans' gray stone building — akin to the outside of an Apple store on the day of a new phone release — it was clear the Italian friar and brilliant doctor of the church could still draw a crowd.

Those in line — mostly young and middle-aged adults and a few families with young kids in tow — were bundled in coats and winter gear. As the line slowly shuffled inside past the reception desk with scattered holy cards of St. Dominic, the atmosphere was pure parish social minus the coffee and doughnuts. Some saw people they knew, others made conversation with those around them. When a woman called out, "John Paul!" to a young boy running off, someone near me smiled and said, "Of course."



A crowd of people line up outside the Dominican House of Studies in Washington Nov. 30 waiting to venerate what is believed to be the skull of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is in the background. (NCR photo/ Carol Zimmermann)

Dominican friars in their white habits worked the crowd like amicable party hosts. Their get, their special guest everyone had gathered for, was one of them, a Dominican, and someone they all had studied, apparently a lot. It was almost as if they had scored a top TED Talks presenter, except, well, he had already made his points in the 13th century.

In the midafternoon, a friar apologetically told the crowd that the line was going to be at a standstill for about 20 minutes while Dominican Fr. Gregory Pine, an assistant director at the Thomistic Institute, preached to the standing room only crowd in the chapel where the relic was located.

The friar encouraged those in line, even those by the "Thank You for Keeping a Respectful Silence Beyond This Point" sign, to follow along with the remarks livestreamed on YouTube. Many pulled out their phones and did just that, making this not-your-early-church pilgrimage as the hallway echoed at different spots with the priest's voice.

He told those listening that the crowd exceeded expectations and had a revival feel.

When I asked one of the friars how many people he thought had been there, he wasn't sure and wished they had used a counter. He said it had been crowded all day though, starting with the 7:30 a.m. Mass. He also didn't want to be interviewed but told this reporter how nerve-wracking it was to drive the relic from St. Dominic Church — its first stop — to the current location, about 4 miles away through the city. He specifically did not get on the highway.



Members of the Dominican order process into St. Dominic Church in Washington carrying a reliquary bearing what is believed to be the skull of St. Thomas Aquinas on Nov. 29, for a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Wilton Gregory. The major relics of the saint were displayed before the altar and then venerated that day. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

In the chapel, which coincidentally contains several relics behind its altar, Pine spoke fondly of the saint, whom he described as someone they study "day in and day out." He also seemed happy to share him, saying: "When we gather round, we are among friends. We share an affinity for things divine."

He hoped those gathered would experience a grace from their short time before the saint's bone and urged them to ask for wisdom, insight, healing and love. For those who didn't know what to say before the relic, he said St. Thomas would lend his words, or "better yet, he'll lend you God's."

When Pine finished, those who had been in line to venerate the relic had to refind their places, which the priest pointed out was like getting your spot at a Southwest

Airlines boarding gate.

In the hallway, the crowd still waited patiently while people talked about other relic tours. The arm of St. Jude went on tour last year, for example. Some discussed how they heard about this event — one from her parish, another at a retreat, someone else online. In front of me was a man considering a vocation to the priesthood and behind me was a college student who joined the Catholic Church a year ago at a Dominican-run parish in Philadelphia.

The rest of the tour for St. Thomas Aquinas

Other scheduled stops for the relic:

- Dec. 2 — St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, Charlottesville, Virginia
- Dec. 4 — St. Pius V Church and Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island
- Dec. 6 — St. Gertrude Church, Cincinnati
- Dec. 7-8 — St. Patrick Church, Columbus, Ohio
- Dec. 10 — St. Louis Bertrand Church, Louisville, Kentucky
- Dec. 12 — St. Rose Church, Springfield, Kentucky
- Dec. 13 — Church of St. Catherine of Siena, New York City
- Dec. 14 — Church of St. Barnabas, Bellmore, New York
- Dec. 14-15 — St. Vincent Ferrer Parish, New York City
- Dec. 16 — St. Patrick Parish, Philadelphia
- Dec. 18 — Sts. Philip and James Parish, Baltimore

Another friar apologized to the crowd for the wait and urged them to limit their veneration to 10 seconds so everyone would get a chance. Previously, he had said they would have 10-15 seconds, and earlier in the day people were told they had 60 seconds.

Once the line made its way through to the chapel, which still smelled of incense from the morning Mass, no one was chatting anymore. The only sounds were of a few babies crying.

Maybe people were wondering how to best use their 10 seconds after waiting an hour.

Just before people reached this skull, enclosed in a simple box atop a wooden frame called a bier, a friar asked if you were there with a group or alone. It was almost like getting on a ride at an amusement park. If you were by yourself, you could squeeze into an empty spot, kneeling on the wooden floor. Groups had to wait a few more seconds for more space.

Once there, people placed their hands directly on the glass box or reliquary. One man held a baby's feet up to it. Some placed holy cards or rosaries against it.

When I got there, I too touched the box with the palm of my hand and thought in that moment of all those who had similarly done so just that day, each with their own intentions — almost akin to the handwritten prayers so many place in the crevices of Jerusalem's Western Wall.

That 10-second realization — that so many wanted to connect with God through St. Thomas Aquinas or sought an answer to prayers through his intercession — seemed more powerful than the enclosed small skull browned with age.

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