



Father Cristopher Pujol prays at the heart relic of Carlo Acutis, the 15-year-old Italian boy who died in 2006 of leukemia and beatified in 2020, at the San Rufino Cathedral in Assisi, Italy, Wednesday, April 2, 2025. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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With the upcoming canonization of its first millennial saint, the Catholic Church has turned to police in Italy to investigate the online sale of some purported relics of [Carlo Acutis](#), who already has been [drawing hundreds of thousands of pilgrims](#) to his shrine.

Since the early days of the faith, many Catholics have [prayed for intercession to saints' relics](#) — usually small parts of their body or clothing that are authenticated by ecclesiastical authorities and preserved in churches. But their sale is strictly forbidden.

"It's not just despicable, but it's also a sin," said Father Enzo Fortunato, who leads the Vatican's World Children's Day committee and has a tiny fragment of Acutis' hair in a chapel by his office for veneration by visiting youth. "Every kind of commerce over faith is a sin."

An anonymous seller had put up for online auction some supposedly authenticated locks of Acutis' hair that were fetching upward of 2,000 euros (\$2,200 US), according to the Diocese of Assisi, before being taken down. Last month, Bishop Domenico Sorrentino asked authorities to confiscate the items and added that if fraudulent, the sale would constitute a "great offense to religious belief."

### **Acutis was precocious in developing and sharing his faith**

Acutis died of leukemia in 2006, when he was only 15 but had already developed a precocious faith life centered on devotion to the Eucharist — which for [Catholics holds the real presence of Christ](#). Savvy with technology, he had created an online exhibit about eucharistic miracles through the centuries.

He will formally be declared a saint at a Mass in front of the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica on April 27. Over the past year, about 1 million pilgrims have flocked to the central Italian town of Assisi, where his body — wearing sneakers, jeans, and a sweatshirt — lies in a shrine in a church dedicated to a key moment in the life of medieval hometown saint, [St. Francis](#).

Acutis' body was exhumed during the more-than-decade-long canonization process and treated so it could be preserved for public showing, including by removing certain organs. His face, which looks as if he were asleep, was reconstructed with a silicone mask, Sorrentino said.

Acutis' heart has been preserved at a dedicated altar in another Assisi church; it will be taken to Rome for the canonization Mass.

"The relics are little, little fragments of the body, to say that that body is blessed, and it explains to us the closeness of God," Sorrentino said.

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## **Handling of relics is a painstaking task for the church**

There are different "classes" of relics — the most important are major body parts, such as the heart. Sorrentino gave Acutis' pericardium — the membrane enclosing the heart — to the U.S. bishop's conference in 2022 for the duration of its multi-year [Eucharistic Revival](#).

The bishop in charge of the saint's body works with requests from other bishops around the world to give or lend relics — always for free — to be exhibited for veneration at parishes and other churches.

"We give this to communities, to parishes, to priests using the relics for the cult in their parish," Sorrentino said. "It's not something magic. It's not something that works automatically, it works through faith."

The practice of gathering relics dates to the earliest days of the church, when many faithful Christians died as martyrs in religious persecutions. Witnesses to the killings would collect blood or fragments of clothing to memorialize their sacrifice and to pray for the saints' intercession, Fortunato said.

In Acutis' case, the first miracle in his canonization process was the healing of a boy in Brazil after a prayer service invoking his intercession with the presence of a relic, he added.

For clergy and pilgrims who have been visiting Acutis' shrine in Assisi this week, the relics take second place to the example of faith and the power of assisting with prayer that saints provide.

"I would never buy one," said Amelia Simone, an 18-year-old from Chicago who has been studying in Rome and credits Acutis for help smoothing out tricky visa paperwork. "I think the intercession aspect is very cool, but I don't think I'd ever want to own a first-class relic. It just would feel a bit weird to me."

Two clergy leading a [Holy Year pilgrimage](#) to Italy from the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, said it was "a great tragedy" that online relic sales were happening.

"We continue to pray for people's conversion," said Father Christopher Pujol.

Bishop Larry Kulick added that relics "are very reverent and very solemn for us as Catholics.

And they are not only inspirational for us, but they are really ... opportunities to help us to pray."

"And so it's unfortunate that such a thing would happen, because that's really a misuse of the relics and actually a disrespect to him and to his memory," he added.

## **Some mixed views on this sainthood process**

Already, the uncommon devotion and attention that Acutis' canonization process has generated has been met with some skepticism. In hundreds of social media comments to [a recent Associated Press article about the phenomenon](#), some called his sainthood a marketing ploy by the church to lure more young people back into the pews.

Many others — and those making pilgrimage to Assisi — praised Acutis for his devotion and were glad he's become a role model for members of his generation.

"It's a joy for me to have encountered Carlo Acutis' body, and especially to ask for his intercession for the transformation and the conversion of many youth," said Sr. Juana de Dios Euceda, a missionary nun from Honduras.