

SRS 6907: *Holy Bones: A History of Catholic Relics*

Fall 2025

Mondays, 2:30-5:30 pm

Desmarais 8143

Prof. Emma Anderson

Coordinates: My office is located at 10-112 Desmarais Building, my office phone is (613) 562-5800, X1176. My email address is eanderso@uottawa.ca. Email is the best way to reach me outside of Office Hours.

Office Hours: Mondays, 1-2:20 (e.g. right before class, but please do not come right at the last minute, as I will be preparing to leave for our class). These Office Hours will likely be impacted somewhat by the Field Trips planned for September 22 and November 10, 2025.

Course Description:

While initially seeming, perhaps, an odd, perverse, or “niche” subject for a graduate seminar, the study of relics arguably offers a unique way of exploring the nexus of Catholic identity in this world and the next. Relics are the bodily remains (the bones, teeth, hair, blood, clothing, and accoutrements) of saints: women and men seen as particularly holy and powerful who have officially been recognized by the Catholic Church for their “heroic sanctity.” These holy remains wordlessly speak to the Catholic denial of death and the assertion of an ongoing survival, even an augmented power, after physical demise. Relics also illustrate the centrality of the body to human identity in a religious tradition that has often been misunderstood as anti-corporeal.

Perhaps predictably, the vast majority of scholarly attention to this point has traditionally focused on the medieval hey-day of Catholic relics, creating the (perhaps unintentional) impression that relics simply faded into obscurity in the aftermath of the Reformation. This course – and the unpublished book-in-progress that I am currently writing, which you will be reviewing and critiquing with me over the coming months – seeks to correct this impression by adding to a growing literature documenting the reassertion of relics’ centrality in Roman Catholicism during the ‘Counter’ (or ‘Catholic’) Reformation and arguing for their ongoing centrality in Catholic conceptual and ritual life.

This course, and the book it teaches, also contends that study of the most venerated and unusual Catholic relics in Canada generates unique insights into both Canadian religious history and the continuing power of relics in the Catholic imaginary in the modern world. Its selected case studies explore the evolution of Catholicism in Canada from colonial times to the present: focusing on topics from the gendered creation and performance of colonial sanctity (in its chapters focusing on the lives and afterlife veneration of Jean de Brébeuf, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Jeanne Le Ber), to authoritarian ultramontanist and its discontents (by examining the infamous Joseph Guibord case), to the Quiet Revolution and Quebec’s strong and ongoing ambivalence about its Catholic past (in the chapter exploring the curious case of the theft of Brother André’s heart), to the contested presence of relics in the modern nation state (by exploring my own recent experience as an expert witness on a relics case prosecuted by Justice Canada).

Course Texts:

All course readings are available on Brightspace, **EXCEPT when they are available electronically through Morisset Library**. Many of the readings, particularly during the second half of the course, are chapter drafts (most unpublished) of my forthcoming book. Therefore, **there’s no coursepack to buy**. Where to find each reading is clearly indicated after each selection (Morisset e-resource = MER, on Brightspace = OB).

Student Assignments:

1) Weekly Response Papers (30%) (ten (10) two-paged papers, due on or before Sunday at noon each week, submission through Brightspace)

Each week, students will prepare a two-page (typed, double spaced) response to the assigned readings for that week. The primary purpose of this exercise is to facilitate students' thinking about the issues concerned in preparation for the class lecture and Forum. But writing short, pithy, and elegant essays is also excellent practice for grant writing, conference presentations, book reviews, and comprehensive exams: other important exercises in graduate school and early career academia. These brief essays will present the student's considered views on the material by analytically responding to and critiquing their arguments and/or linking their ideas to those of others we have studied. At the end of each Response Paper, students must pose thought-provoking questions for discussion during the Forum. Students should post their paper to Brightspace by noon each Sunday (at the latest), thus making them available to the week's Forum Leader and the rest of the class. This should be considered a **strict deadline**. Students are responsible for producing **ten (10)** Response papers during the term, meaning that you can **take one week "off" sometime during the semester** (e.g. because there are 12 classes, but no assignment is due for our first meeting together). Whichever week you decide to skip is up to you, but please let me and the Forum Leader for the week know. **Please note:** in preparing for the classes on **September 29** and on **November 17, 2025**, students have a **CHOICE of readings to respond to**, as **they may choose to reflect upon their participation in the (optional) Field Trip to Notre Dame Basilica on September 22** (and its readings) **or on the Field Trip to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity Historical Site and Oratory on November 10** (and its readings).

2) Leadership of "The Forum" and Forum Participation (20%)

In addition to the lecture, each week students will engage in a Forum, in which they will discuss the assigned readings for the week. Leadership of the Forum will rotate between students. A sign-up sheet will circulate during our first classes together. Forum Leaders will utilize their review of student Response Papers to lead debate and discussion of the pertinent questions raised by the readings. Their role is to facilitate discussion, not to lecture. However, it is expected that each student will come to class sessions fully prepared to engage in informed discussion of the course materials, having read and thought about the assigned readings and their peers' papers, whether they are leading the Forum or not.

3) Research Paper Proposal (5%) (due on Sunday, October 5, 2025, by noon, submission via Brightspace)

Students are encouraged to start thinking about possible topics as soon as possible, in preparation for submitting their Research Paper Proposal (a formal two-to-three page document outlining the topic, provisional thesis, outline, and annotated bibliography).

4) Research Paper (30%) (due Monday, December 15, 2025, by midnight, submission via Brightspace)

Throughout the term, students will research their own projects for their sixteen to eighteen page (double-spaced) formal research paper. Research Papers are due two weeks after our last day of class, by midnight on December 15, 2025. **Please do be careful not to neglect your Research Paper because of your weekly Response Papers:** you must endeavor, from the very beginning of the semester, to dedicate time to each of these quite different writing projects, each of which develop different aspects and facets of your writing.

5) Research Presentation (15%)

Students are also required to present their evolving research to the class in a fifteen-to-twenty minute formal presentation followed by questions from students and the professor. Ideally, students will present their research during the section of the course which most closely corresponds to the historical time frame or topic of their own research. This way, presenting students will not only benefit from their peers' and professor's suggestions for improvement of their work, but the class will receive valuable additional information on specialized topics which complement the course readings and theme for that week. Grading of Research Presentations will of course be sensitive to the fact that the presentations made earlier in the semester will, of necessity, reflect more preliminary stages of research.

Course Map:

Part I: The Development and Evolution of the Catholic Cult of Relics until Early Modernity

September 8, 2025:

Why Study Catholic Relics?: Course Introduction

Following a short introductory lecture, we will overview the broad themes and ideas of the course, explore the assignments, have a Q & A session, and start the sign-up procedure for presentations, Forum leadership, etc. There's no Forum this week.

Required Reading:

- Freeman, Charles. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, "Sacred Flesh between Death and Resurrection," p. 139-145 and "Prologue," p. 108 (**Morisset e-resource**).

September 15, 2025:

The Rise of the Cult of Relics in Early Christianity

How did something as odd as the cult of relics get started? What circumstances made it seem not just normal but reverent? How is the cult of relics linked to early Christian experiences of martyrdom? How did non-Christians react to the cult of relics, and in what sense can this cult be described as countercultural or as part of a larger Christian tendency towards defiant paradox? What traditions were born with Christianity itself that still exist today? When did the bodies of the holy dead start to be divided? Decorated and exposed? When did exposure to relics begin to be associated with miracles and healings? What can the cult of relics tell us about Catholic conceptualizations of the relationship between the soul and the body? About Christian anthropology? About life and death?

Required Readings:

- Freeman, Charles. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, "The Battle for Acceptance," p. 29-36 (**MER**).
- Bartlett, Robert. *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, Chapter One, "Origins (100-500)," p. 3-26 and Chapter 8, "Relics and Shrines," p. 239-250 (**MER**).

September 22, 2025 at 11 am (e.g. before class)

Field Trip #1: The Relics of Notre Dame Basilica (attendance optional)

Notre Dame Basilica is the closest thing that Ottawa boasts to a medieval cathedral. And, in fact, despite the church's nineteenth-century provenance, many continuities exist between this structure and earlier European churches, including the way in which relics are displayed and presented. Please join me for a "behind the scenes" tour of the Basilica, its crypt, and its hidden treasures. We will then have coffee at the Crypt Café before class. Please meet me at 11:00 at the front door of the church, at 385 Sussex Drive (across the street from the National Gallery of Canada). **As this event takes place outside of regular class hours, attendance is optional. However, you should plan on coming unless you have another class at this time.**

Please note: The following readings (which are optional, like the field trip itself) have been chosen to enhance your experience onsite and get you thinking. Students who wish to can write their reflection paper for this week on the field trip and its associated readings rather than on the readings/topic assigned for our *next* class on September 29, 2025.

Suggested Readings:

- Taylor, Richard. *How to Read a Church: A Guide to Images, Symbols and Meanings in Churches and Cathedrals*. London, Rider Books, 2003, "Reading a Church: Preliminaries," p. 1-20 (**on Brightspace**).
- Scott, Robert A. *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, "Honoring the Dead," p. 183-208 (**OB**).

September 22, 2025:

Medieval Fluorescence of the Cult of Relics

The medieval era marked what has traditionally been seen as the high point of the cult of relics (to the point that relic veneration *after* this era has often been presented as a sort of strange “hangover” from the Middle Ages, rather than what it in fact is, a profound and integral part of Catholic thought and practice). This class will explore the cresting of the cult of relics in medieval Europe and explain the phenomenon’s strong link with pilgrimage and expectations of the miraculous. It will articulate some of the ironies of the cult of relics and investigate the shaping of the Eucharist as a kind of reproducible, edible relic.

Required Readings:

- Harpur, James. *The Pilgrim Journey: A History of Pilgrimage in the Western World*. Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2016, “Pilgrimage, Relics, and the Afterlife,” p. 65-73. **(OB)**.
- Freeman, Charles. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, “Hope and Desperation in a Disordered World,” p. 80-88, “The Eyes are Fed with Gold-Bedecked Reliquaries,” p. 108-119, and “The Virgin Mary and the Penitent Whore,” p. 169-185. **(MER)**.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *Saint Louis*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009, “The King of the Relics: The Crown of Thorns,” p. 94-101 **(OB)**.
- Bartlett, Robert. *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, “Patronage and Invocation: The Mutual Relationship,” p. 103-112 **(MER)**.

September 29, 2025:

Reformation Critiques and Counter Reformation Affirmations

The enthusiasm of medieval Catholics for relics generated powerful push-back from critics both within (Erasmus) and outside (Luther, Calvin) the Catholic Church. The excesses of Catholic practices involving saints, relics, pilgrimage, credulity and venality were a favorite target of reformers. Stung, Catholics pushed back, affirming both the power and the sanctity of beliefs and practices involving relics, even as new archeological discoveries allowed the display of relics to reach astounding new heights during the “Catholic” or “Counter” Reformation. **Reminder:** If you wish, you can write on the Field Trip from last week (and its readings) rather than on the required readings for *this* week.

Required Readings:

- Bartlett, Robert. *Why Can the Dead do Such Great Things?*, “The Protestant Reformation,” p. 85-91 **(MER)**.
- Freeman, Charles. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, “Protestantism and the New Iconoclasm,” p. 228-246 and “Reasserting the Miraculous,” p. 254-265 **(MER, “Reasserting” also OB)**
- Koudounaris, Paul. *Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013, “Holy Bodies: Relics and the Roman Catacombs,” p. 23-43 **(OB)**.

Part II: Relics and Modernity: Exploring the History of the Catholic Church in Canada through Holy Bones

October 6, 2025:

The Skull of a Martyr – Jean de Brébeuf

The Counter Reformation also marked a period in Catholic global expansion. In many ways, this was both a practical and an ideological response to the tension, war, and violence that Christian confessional divisions had introduced to Europe. Catholic missionaries sought new lands to conquer for Christ and attract new souls to the church as a response to Protestant exsanguination in Europe. Once again, martyrdom was seen as a difficult but necessary way to win converts to the cross. This class will explore the life, death, and cultic afterlife of Jean de Brébeuf, an early Jesuit missionary to Canada, whose preeminence among the eight men collectively canonized as the North American martyrs is due in no small part to the survival of his relics. **Reminder: your Research Paper Proposal is due, along with your weekly Response Paper, on Sunday, October 5, 2025, by noon).** Students who feel overloaded may wish to take this as their one “week off” from their Response Paper.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma. *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, "A Cruel Death," p. 38-42, "False Calm," p. 61-65, "Building a Mystery," p. 70-72, "*Les Braves et les Martyrs*," p. 124-127, "Bones of Contention," p. 214-231 (MER).
- Bourrie, Mark. *Crosses in the Sky: Jean de Brébeuf and the Destruction of Huronia*. Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2024, "Saint," p. 356-365 (OB).

***Thanksgiving and Fall Reading Week: October 13-17, 2025

This week there will be no class and no office hours***

October 20, 2025:

In the Arms of God's Grandmother: The Canadian Cult of Sainte-Anne

This class will explore the Canadian cult of the mother of the Virgin Mary in Canada from the seventeenth century to the present, exploring her veneration among French Canadians and Indigenous peoples in particular. France and New France were outliers globally, in that in these Gallic environments proved sturdily immune to Martin Luther's attack on his former patron, which made God's Grandmother steadily less popular and influential in Germany, the Low Countries, and even Spain. Sainte-Anne is a fascinating example of how a saint can gather to herself an ever-increasing universe of meanings and associations that can appeal to both male and female clientele and can reach across cultural barriers. Many of Sainte-Anne's qualities and responsibilities resonated with traditional Indigenous values and family structures. In some cases, participation in her cult provided valuable camouflage for Indigenous continuity of traditions during a time when the expression of traditional spirituality was forbidden by Canadian law.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "In the Arms of God's Grandmother," (unpublished chapter draft from my monograph in progress, *Rich and Strange: Catholic Relics in Canada*) (OB).
- In addition to reading the assigned reading for this week, students are also required to find and watch the film *La Neuvaïne* (2005, directed by Bernard Émond) in its entirety. There is a hard copy DVD at Morisset (FF DR 2005 N488) and I also have a personal copy for anyone who wants to borrow it).

October 27, 2025:

Bones of Contention: Kateri Tekakwitha

This class will explore the contemporary controversy regarding the relics of Canada's first Indigenous saint at Kahnawake, Quebec, the site of her tomb, where a furious debate rages about how she should best be honoured, in the context of a thorough-going exploration of her life and afterlife. Some Haudenosaunee traditionalists have sought to salute the woman they see as their ancestor by reburying her relics in the ground, arguing that keeping her bones above ground represents a profanation of her grave. Catholic Iroquois disagree - pointing to the saint's miraculous healings, achieved through her relics, including the celebrated 2006 incident in which a fragment of Kateri's wrist-bone is credited with arresting the spread of necrotizing fasciitis in an Indigenous boy in Washington State: the long-awaited miracle that led to her 2012 canonization.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "Kateri Tekakwitha: Life and Afterlife" (unpublished book chapter from my monograph in progress, *Rich and Strange: Catholic Relics in Canada*) (OB).

November 3, 2025:

Lost and Found: Forgetting and Remembering Jeanne Le Ber

This class will explore the story of the life and cult of Canada's first recluse, or holy hermit, and present the fascinating tale of skeleton, missing and presumed lost, and how this loss impacted her veneration. Despite her wealth and high status, Jeanne Le Ber renounced her considerable wealth and status to live some 34 of her 52 years in voluntary isolation from the World, first within a room in her home, and then in a purpose-built cell adjoining the chapel belonging to the Congregation of Notre-Dame. Her cell was given an interior window overlooking the altar so that the pious Jeanne could live, work, and sleep within plain sight of the Eucharist to

which she had such devotion. Withdrawn from the world, Le Ber occupied herself in penance, prayer, and the production of magnificently embroidered vestments and altar-cloths. After her death, she was buried in the church crypt alongside family members who had predeceased her. In 1991 the search began for Le Ber's remains, which were thought to have been lost. The Congregation of Notre Dame employed forensic anthropologist and novelist Kathy Reichs, who was able definitively to identify Le Ber on the basis of the many grooves made in her teeth by decades of biting embroidery thread and the stress on her knees – still evident on her skeleton - by near-constant prayer.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "Remembering and Forgetting Jeanne Le Ber, 1662-1714." (unpublished book chapter from my monograph in progress, *Rich and Strange: Catholic Relics in Canada*) (OB).

Monday AM, November 10, 2025 (e.g. before class)

Field Trip #2: Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity (attendance optional)

While we cannot tour the sites sanctified by Jeanne Le Ber or "contaminated" by Joseph Guibord, as both are in Montreal, we can visit a local nineteenth-century religious institution: the Sisters of Charity Historical Site (which houses Élisabeth Bruyère's veil, ring, and crucifix, and visit the Oratoire containing her tomb. This local foundress, known chiefly for the hospital named for her, has been recognized by the Vatican as a "venerable servant of God," the first step on the road to canonization. Our tour will feature a meeting with Soeur Louise Charbonneau, who is the Vice Postulator for Bruyère's causa. Please meet me at 27 Bruyère Street at 11 am. As with the first field trip, because this event takes place outside of regular class hours, attendance is optional, though it is strongly recommended if you don't have another class at this time, as it will greatly enhance your experience in this course. **Please note:** The following readings (which are optional, like the field trip itself, and are available for you on Brightspace) have been chosen to enhance your experience onsite and get you thinking. Students who wish to can write their reflection paper for this week on the field trip and its associated readings rather than on the readings/topic assigned for our *next* class on November 17, 2025.

Suggested Readings:

- Higgins, Michael. *Stalking the Holy: The Pursuit of Saint-Making*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2006, selection TBD, (OB).
- McBane, Michael. *Bytown 1847: Élisabeth Bruyère and the Irish Famine Refugees*, 2022, p. 63-84 (OB).

November 10, 2025:

"There Rests a Rebel:" The Unquiet Bones of Joseph Guibord, Liberal Excommunicate

Arguably, there is much to be learned from what any given era considers fallen, lost, polluted, and disgusting as there is to be gained by studying what it considers blessed, miraculous, pure, and powerful. This class will focus upon the infamous "Guibord Affair" of the late nineteenth century, using the dramatic example of a hapless liberal intellectual whose excommunication and consequent refusal of burial in consecrated soil unleashed one of the longest and most infamous lawsuits in Canadian history. The language used in the six year long debate over Guibord's final resting place highlight the importance of the concepts of relics and ritual profanation, as Guibord's remains were treated like a kind of "anti-relic" by proponents of Quebecois cleric-nationalism and ultramontanism, while his cause was championed by his fellow liberal Catholics, leading to a sort of nineteenth-century preview of a "Quiet Revolution" that would not arrive for another century.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "There Rests a Rebel:" The Unquiet Bones of Joseph Guibord, Liberal Excommunicate" (unpublished book chapter from my monograph in progress), (OB).

November 17, 2025:

"Thou Shalt not Suffer thy Holy One to See Corruption:" The Popular Sanctity of Rose Prince

As we move into the twentieth century, we will explore one of the most inexplicable phenomenon of Catholic remains: (alleged) incorruption. Perhaps most famously illustrated by the Snow White-like corpse of Marian seer Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, few are aware that there is also a Canadian example of this phenomenon. Saint-in-waiting Rose Prince of British Columbia, a mid-twentieth century Indigenous woman, enjoys a

contemporary popular reputation for sanctity and bodily incorruption among both Catholic officials and Rose's own people, the Dakelh (Carrier), though the two disagree on almost everything else. **Reminder:** In preparing your Reflection Paper for class this week, you can choose to write on the Field Trip from last week (and its associated readings) rather than the required readings for this week.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "Residential School Saint: The Life, Death, and Turbulent Afterlife of Rose Prince of the Carrier Nation," *Church History*, September 2020, Volume 89, Issue 3 (**MER, OB**).
- Please also watch the documentary film: *Uncorrupted: The Story of Rose Prince* (a hard-copy DVD is available at Morisset Library on course reserve, DVD05350. I also have a personal copy I am happy to lend.

November 24, 2025:

Who Stole Brother André's Heart?

This class will explore the fascinating saga of the 1973 theft of the preserved heart of Brother André from the Oratoire Saint Joseph in Montreal. The story of the organ's preservation and public display, and its sudden (and still unsolved) theft at the height of the Quiet Revolution will provide a unique overview of the unfolding evolution of Quebecois Catholicism: from the nineteenth-century golden age of clerico-nationalism (in which Frère André was born and raised) to the secularism and strident anticlericalism of the 1960s and 70s. This case study demonstrates definitively that "*furta sacra*" or relic theft is not exclusively a medieval phenomenon (though the motivations for medieval and modern theft might differ considerably). Moreover, the widespread horror and anger that greeted the theft across Quebec shows that characterizations of the Quiet Revolution as a straightforward example of secularization are wrong-headed. The Revolution would be better understood as an anticlerical movement, rejecting clerical abuses of power, rather than a rejection of Catholicism in toto.

Required Readings:

- Anderson, Emma, "Who Stole Brother Andre's Heart?" (unpublished book chapter, **OB**).

December 1, 2025:

Is That You, Santy Claus?: Relics and Canadian Law

During the depth of the Covid epidemic I was contacted by Border Services Canada about the case of three impounded religious reliquaries, all of Saint Nicholas of Myra (the fourth century Turkish bishop whose fame for Christian charity, particularly to children and young people, serves as the mythic basis for Santa Claus). Eventually, I was called upon to serve as an expert witness for Justice Canada when the case went to trial. The government won, and the relics were repatriated to Italy (in fact, they were translated to a basilica dedicated to the saint in Bari, Italy, which contains many of his other relics). My experiences as a expert witness highlights the many confounding – and sometimes humorous – questions surrounding the identification, authentication of Catholic relics in a period of internet commerce and globalization.

Required Readings:

- *Expert Report of Dr. Emma Anderson* (**OB**).
- *Summary Judgement* in the case (**OB**).

December 15, 2025:

Reminder: Your Research Papers are due by midnight tonight (submission via Brightspace).