

Friars warn of websites claiming to have 'sacred soil from saint of love'

Beware of scammers selling fake relics from St Valentine

FRIARS at the Irish church housing the remains of St Valentine have issued a warning after they discovered internet scammers claiming to sell blessed relics.

Whitefriar Street Church in Dublin is one of the few churches in the world where the faithful can pray to relics of St Valentine, the third century Roman saint associated with a tradition of courtly love. Every year believers flock to the shrine especially on the saint's day, February 14.

A relic is usually part of a saint's body, but could also be an object or clothing the saint used in their lifetime or even a modern object that has come into contact with the saint's remains.

Fr Patrick Breen, subprior of the church, warned: 'You can't buy relics. If people see anything, they should contact us. We don't sell relics, they are a sacred object; you don't sell anything that is sacred or blessed.'

'That is just Church law and custom - we don't do that. So if relics are being sold, there is straight away an issue.'

The Carmelite friars were shocked late last year to discover a website selling earth described as being from St Valentine's reliquary. The website was selling St Valentine medals and earth together for \$250 (€227) with what it claimed was a 'Certificate of Authentication'.

Fr Breen said in their case the sellers even used photographs

By **Niamh Griffin**

from the Whitefriar website to bolster their claims.

He said: 'Anybody can make a medal, but they can't say it is from here. The moment they said this is soil taken from the reliquary, that's now false pretences. People with faith would say this has touched the reliquary, has touched St Valentine, and I want that connection.'

He added: 'People will try all sorts of stuff, they try to cash in all sorts of things.'

'It was annoying that our name was being used and that the relic was being used in that way, and quite blatantly so.'

A sealed casket containing parts of the saint's body and a small container of his blood rests in an altar in the Dublin church. The altar stands on a marble floor. It was given to the Carmelite Order by Pope Gregory XVI in 1835 when an Irish friar visited Rome.

In September an American visitor to Dublin alerted the Carmelites to the website, saying she realised

REAL THING: St Valentine relics at Whitefriars



instantly on entering the church that the claims were false.

The friars hired Irish solicitors to investigate. Fr Breen said he does not know how many medals were actually sold.

The solicitors found the website was hosted on servers in Taiwan and America and legal action would have been too expensive.

Instead they sent a letter, signed by Prior Simon Nolan threatening legal action unless the claims were removed.

Fr Breen said: 'The legal people said we would have had to try it in three different jurisdictions. So we were very lucky when we sent the letter that they took it down straight away, that was a godsend to us.'

The owners of the website did not respond to queries. The Irish Mail on



St Valentine's Mass Reliquary from Whitefriar St. Dublin



LETTER: Prior Nolan; inset, the reliquary at Whitefriars

Sunday has found that online auction site eBay also hosts dozens of so-called relics for sale, including wood linked to the Virgin Mary for €2,045 and a Holy Nail linked to the Crucifixion for €6,200.

The MoS also found several adult dating websites using the name of St Valentine, along with the name of the Whitefriar Street Church

'St Valentine is a powerful man after all these years'

and text taken from its website to attract web traffic.

Three other churches in Scotland, Spain and Italy host authentic Saint Valentine relics but the Irish church is the best known.

Speaking about the focus on expensive flowers and big cards for February 14, Fr Breen said: 'St Valentine is a powerful man, after all these years there is still the draw.'

'Hallmark are a corporation look-

ing to make their money like anyone else, so if there is a feast that catches people's eye they are going to cash in.'

He added: 'It would be nice if it wasn't just "Valentine's Day" on the cards, but "St Valentine's Day" was in there so that it would bring us back to what it actually came from.'

Last year, more than 700 people visited the shrine on February 14. Fr Breen said the order left out cards for people to take as mementos.

'But people actually wrote on the cards and placed them on the altar above the shrine.'

'So when I cleared up that night, there were six or seven hundred cards left behind,' he said.

Many other people lit candles or simply knelt in prayer at the shrine. There have even been proposals on the day with other couples visiting to celebrate anniversaries.

And, poignantly, some people come, he said, to remember loved ones who have passed away.

The Friars are expecting another busy day on Friday, with the church open until 9pm.

news@mailonsunday.ie

Man charged with murder after Kilkenny incident

A MAN has been charged with murder over a death in Kilkenny in the early hours of Thursday.

The deceased, Edward (Liam) O'Sullivan, 46, originally from Waterford, was critically injured on High Hayes Terrace near the Castlecomer Road at about 4am. He had been living in Kilkenny

By **Garán Murphy**

for some 20 years. Mr O'Sullivan was taken to St Luke's Hospital for treatment for severe head injuries but was pronounced dead.

A woman in her 20s and man in his 30s were arrested following

the incident. A file is being prepared in respect of the woman, who has since been released.

Garrett Smith, 33, of St Fiacc's Terrace in Graiguecullen, Co. Carlow, was informed of the charge at Kilkenny Garda Station.

Smith appeared at a special sitting of Kilkenny District Court

yesterday afternoon on a charge of murder.

Judge Geraldine Carthy remanded Smith in custody and adjourned the matter to a sitting of Kilkenny District Court on Tuesday.

The scene around the nearby John Street was cordoned off in

recent days pending a technical examination.

A postmortem was carried out on Friday and a murder investigation launched.

Gardaí have appealed for drivers with dashcam footage of the area between 3am and 6am on Thursday, to contact them.