



Thousands flock to holy relic of 'God's influencer'

Catholics descended on Norfolk to be near a sliver of the heart of a first millennial saint, writes **Kaya Burgess**

The London-born teenager named as the first millennial saint of the Catholic Church was known as a boy with a big heart. His good deeds and early death also touched millions.

It was thus deemed fitting that a sliver of Carlo Acutis's heart, or rather of his pericardium, the sac that surrounded his heart, came to the UK this week. It was the first visit to Britain of a holy relic taken from the teenage computer whizzkid, who has been called a "cyber apostle" and "God's influencer".

In Walsingham in north Norfolk, a service of prayer and blessing was attended by between 1,500 and 2,000 Catholics, some of whom wore T-shirts with a picture of Acutis's face and the words "Santo Carlo".

"It is a touch of sainthood," said Jennifer Walvin, 80, who had travelled from York to be near the relic.

"I'm very excited about him and the thought the church will use him as a patron saint for the internet. I've come here for healing."

Pope Francis confirmed in May that Acutis, who was born in London in 1991 and died aged 15 from leukaemia in 2006, will be canonised as the first saint from the 21st century.

Worshippers travelled from around Britain and from as far as New Zealand to see the relic as part of the New Dawn pilgrimage, an annual prayer and worship festival in the Norfolk countryside.

Alexandra Lennard, 47, a construction project manager, came from Southampton with her children, twins Olivia and Jasmine, 11, James, 13, and Amalia, 14. "I wanted the kids to see that

[it is possible] to achieve sainthood and aspire to holiness," she said. "It is not something out of reach."

The throng of worshippers, including many from the Irish Traveller community, joined a procession through country lanes before queueing for up to two hours to have a golden, trophy-like reliquary, barely 30cm high, pressed to their foreheads by priests as they prayed for healing or blessing.

Visible behind the glass, within a circle of ornate gold, was a sliver of tissue, removed from Acutis's body as a relic that is touring the world.

A lock of the boy's hair was presented to English priests during the ceremony on Wednesday at the Basilica of Our Lady of Walsingham, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared in 1061, and will remain there.

Two cousins Mary, ten, and Jane, seven, came with their parents, 13 other

cousins, aged from eight months to 20 years, and several aunts, uncles, great-aunts and a grandmother from across Surrey and Hertfordshire. Mary said: "We learnt about it at school. We've come for God. It's a quiet place and you can think about good things."

Jacob Franciszek, 22, from Poznan in Poland, said he had come because he "needed to change something" in his life "to make a big difference".

"He is the first saint of this century," said Joyce Potter, 92, from Norwich. "I've read a book about Carlo and given it to my grandchildren, who are going through uni. There is so much poison in the world, but Carlo is so refreshing. He was such a good boy."

Acutis was born to an Italian mother



Monsignor Anthony Figueiredo with the pericardium relic of Blessed Carlo Acutis, the first millennial saint, at the Basilica of Our Lady, Walsingham. Up to 2,000 Catholics attended a special service, including Joyce Porter and her son Chris



and father working in London and moved back to Italy as an infant. He was said by his parents, who were not devoutly religious, to have been drawn to faith as a toddler, asking to visit churches to "say hello to Jesus".

His mother, Antonia Salzano Acutis, told The Times that her son took a keen interest in the plight of the homeless and migrants in Milan and defended bullied schoolmates. He built a website and exhibition documenting miracles.

The congregation in Walsingham heard that his global appeal came from being an "ordinary" boy who "loved football, Pokémon, action films, animals ... and played saxophone".

The Catholic Church has attributed

two posthumous miracles to Acutis, saying that a Brazilian boy and Italian woman were saved from death after their families prayed to Acutis in heaven, asking him to petition God for healing.

If it is rare for one who died so young to be made a saint. It is even rarer for it to happen within 20 years of their death, with his canonisation expected next year. It is thought to be unprecedented for a saint's parents to be alive to witness it.

Before someone is canonised, their body is usually exhumed and reburied at a holy site. It is common for samples of bone, hair or tissue to be removed and placed in reliquaries for veneration, with such relics deemed to act like a hotline to heaven. This is the first time, however, that parental approval has had to be sought.

"It never happens in the church, that the parents are alive," said Monsignor Anthony Figueiredo, 60, a priest from Assisi where Acutis's body is on display in a shrine, partly reconstructed with

silicone and dressed in jeans and Nike trainers. "Obviously, we're talking about parts of a body of a young man, 15 years old, whose parents are still alive and still sensitive."

He said it was "agreed with the parents" that Acutis's heart could be removed and kept at the basilica in Assisi, while a sliver of his pericardium could be "taken as a first-class major relic around the world".

Figueiredo said of saints: "Their glorified bodies are in heaven, but their earthly remains remind us that they walked this Earth."

He told the congregation, who spilt out of the chapel and into seating outside: "[From Assisi] we have been watching this nation tear itself apart in riots and looting and violence. We need to pray here and ask God to help us."

He said England was "one of the most most secularised nations on Earth", and he hoped that Acutis's story and relic would help to bring England "back to Jesus".

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