

THE CHAPEL OF THE RELICS

The Chapel of the Relics (**fig. 73**) is located in the Bell Tower, right hand when entering the Basilica. Here till the year 2010 was the Treasury Hall. When it has been opened the St Nicholas' Museum (on the backside of the Basilica, near the ancient arch of the City walls), it was decided to exhibit in the Museum all the pieces previously in the Treasury Hall with the exception of the reliquaries still containing a sacred relic. The chapel of the Relics normally is not open for tourist visits, but only for personal prayer.

Around the year 1150 this tower was destined to function as chapel-cemetery of the canons. The epigraphs speaking of this destination are today in the St Nicholas Museum. Later the chapel was dedicated to the Saints Peter and Paul. On high it was created a passage in order to allow the rev. Prior to come down into the church without going outside. The oval paintings are exactly the ancient rectors or Priors who (appointed by the King till the year 1929, when the church fell under papal jurisdiction) governed the Church. The last of these Priors died in 1945. Because of the crisis of the Chapter of the Canons, in 1951 the Pope Pius XII replaced the Canons with the Dominican Fathers.

The most precious Relics preserved in St Nicholas Basilica come from two main sources: the passage of Crusaders and Pilgrims to and from the Holy Land, and the generosity of Charles of Anjou, King of Naples (1285-1309).

The relics are put in large glass cases all along the front wall.

1. **The Greek-Angevin Cross** (The glass case in front of you): Angevin Cross, Candelabra, and wooden box of the translation.



The **Angevin Cross** is probably the most precious among the relics because of its antiquity. In it are united two religious devotions, the Greek Byzantine and the French-Angevine ones. In fact, inside the Angevin reliquary of the end of **XIII century**, exactly where the arms cross each other, is set a

Greek Byzantine reliquary of the **Xth century**, in which is kept a piece of the wood of the Lord's cross with this inscription:

Protect and save me, o wood of the Cross, me who with faith wanted that you were kept in this silver case with gems set inside.

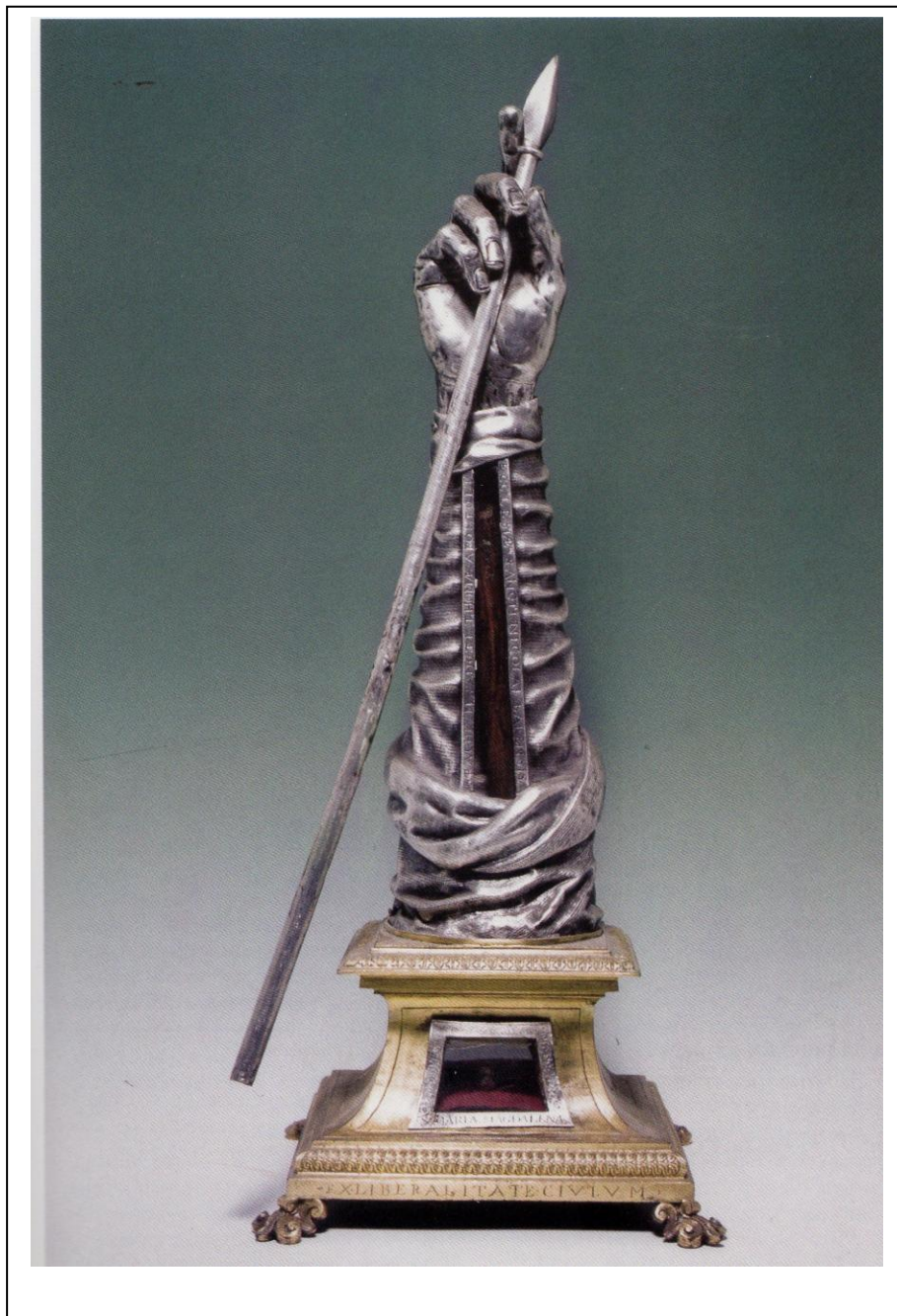
This relic was brought to France at the time of the sack Constantinople of 1204 or few years later. When Charles II of Anjou decided that St Nicholas should have been his Royal Chapel accompanied his decision with donations corresponding to that dignity. For example in St. Nicholas Archives is kept the most ancient (about 1250) Gradual of the Paris Royal Chapel (Cod. 5). It is very likely that he obtained this relic from the King of France providing it with a very beautiful and precious reliquary.

The chandeliers, very finely crafted of rock crystal (fig. 82) are documented in the Angevine donation of 1296, described by Charles of Anjou himself in the parchment kept in the Archives of the Basilica. They are one of the most ancient examples of the kind in Italy.



2. St Thomas and St Mary Magdalene (The left glass case)

In the glass case on the left is displayed the relic of St **Thomas the Apostle** (with an arrow in the right hand), that was donated by the French count of Edessa to a French bishop that died in Bari in 1102. In the base of this reliquary is also kept a tooth of St Mary Magdalene.



Together with the relic of **St Vincent of Saragoza** (reliquary of the naked arm), donated equally in 1102 by the dying bishop of Valencia, this relic is the most ancient documented in the Basilica. The donations of St Thomas and St Vincent are in fact narrated by the major Barian writer of the time, John the Archdeacon, who was an eyewitness.



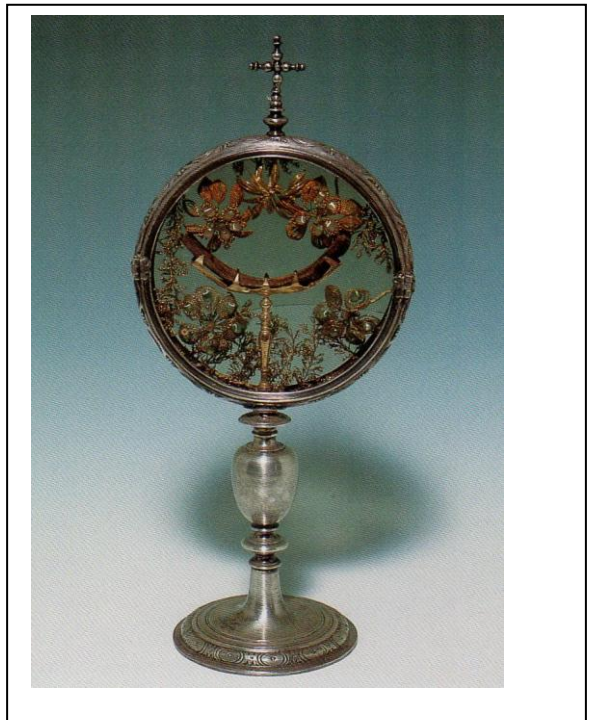
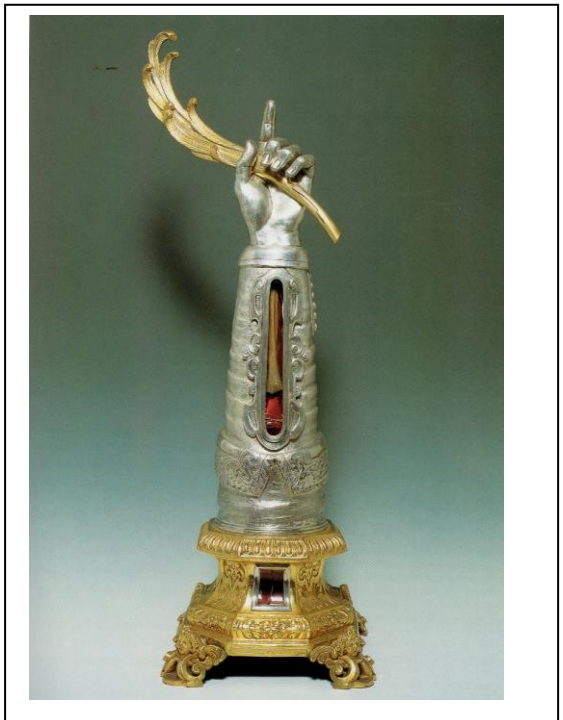
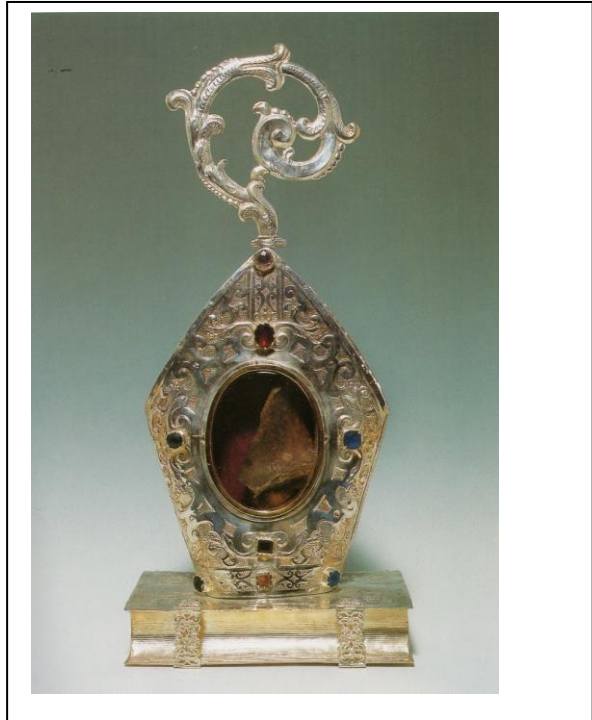
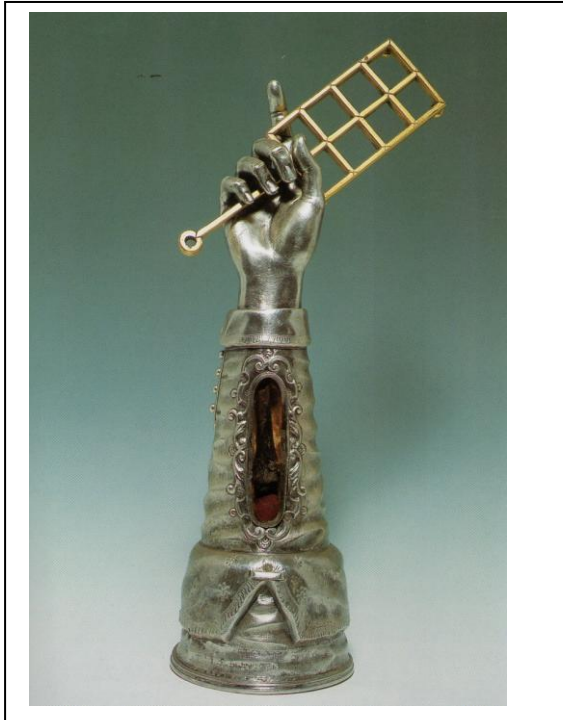
Probably to the times of the Crusades are to be dated the donations of the relic of **St James the Minor** (stick in the left hand) and of St Placidus (in its base).



To the Angevine period (1266-1442) has to be dated St. **Mary Magdalene** (a tooth in the original ampulla),



And very probably also the ones of **St Laurence** (the grid in the hand), **St Blaise** (mitre and book), **St Xistus** (golden palm in the left hand), **St Lucy** (small round reliquary), AND the Veil of the Virgin (small oval reliquary).

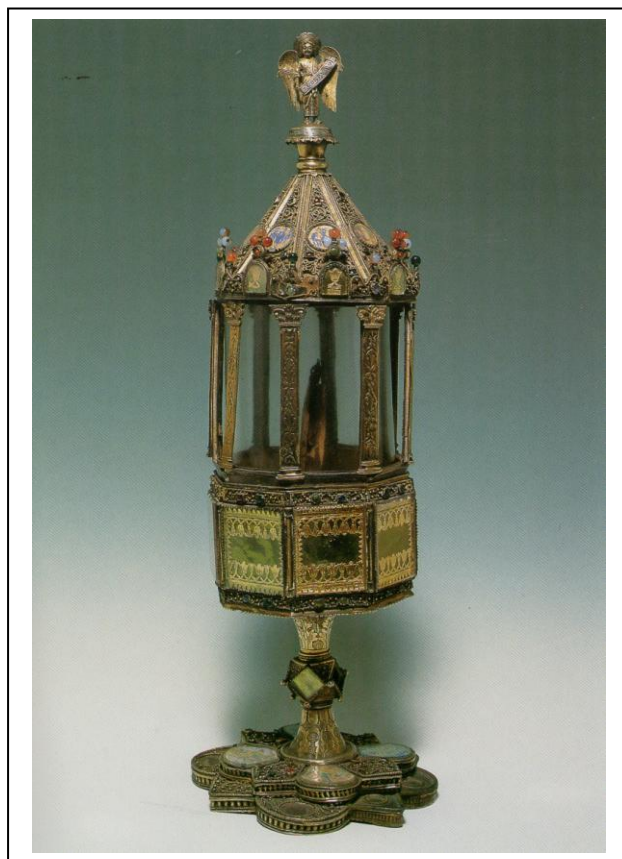
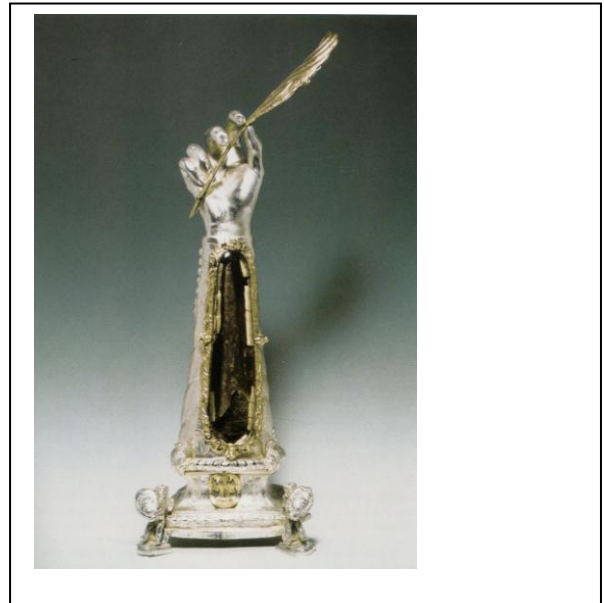


3. The sacred Thorn (The right glass case)

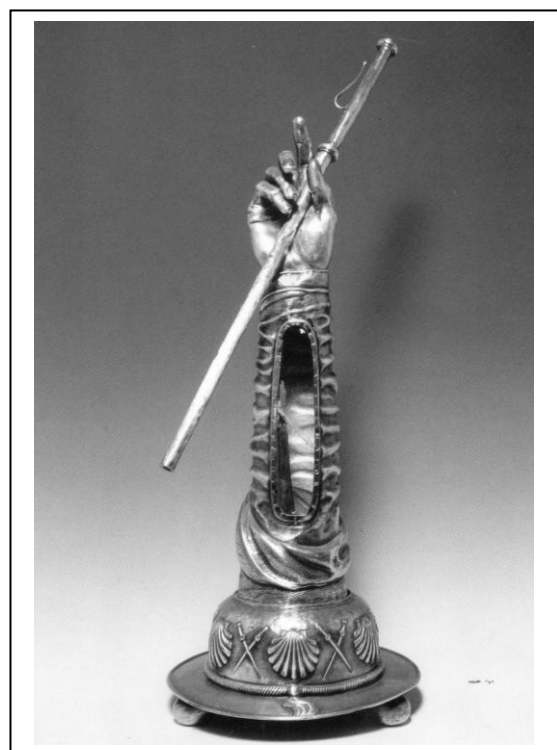
In the right glass case is exhibited one of the most famous relics in the history of St Nicholas Basilica: the **sacred Thorn**. Almost certainly it was donated by Charles II of Anjou together with other relics of the Passion of the Lord. According to the popular devotion when the Holy Friday coincides with the Annunciation (March 25) the top of the Thorn bleeds.



Other relics of the Passion of the Lord are the **sacred Sponge** (cube with a little dome), **St Longinus** (golden palm in the right hand), the centurion who pierced Jesus' ribs. From the artistic point of view very precious is the reliquary in form of an octagonal little temple. Inside is the relic of **St Sebastian**, but originally was an Eucharistic monstrance. In fact on its top there is an angel holding the inscription: *Corpus Domini* (body of the Lord).



Worthy of attention are also the relics of the popes **St Gregory the Great** (tiara and three arms cross) and **St Urban** (silver palm in the left hand). Very significant is also the relic of **St James the Major**. This relic in fact created an ideal connection with the sanctuary of St James of Compostela, the most famous sanctuary of pilgrimages in Europe. As in that sanctuary the right transept was dedicated to St Nicholas, in the Barian sanctuary the pilgrim, seeing this right hand holding a reed with at its base several shells, immediately connected the relic with St James.



4. The wooden box of the Translation

Going back to the ships in the port of Myra/Andriake the sailors who had just stolen St. Nicholas' relics had no appropriate container where to put them. They decided then to put them in a provisional container, that is the one they used to store their food. At the end of the trip, before entering the port of Bari they decided to give a better "reliquary" to the bones of the Saint. They did so while stopped in the port of St George, three miles from Bari, because both chroniclers (Nicephorus and John the Archdeacon) say that there they prepared a case by using the best fabrics they had bought in Antioch.

Therefore it is not easy to say whether the wooden box we see is the one from Myra or the one from St George. The latter is more probable.

The three inventories of the XIV century (1313, 1326, 1361) do not refer to it, therefore it is not clear where it was located. In 1659 a Spanish nobleman, Pedro de Varays, set the planks inside another wooden reliquary. From 1887 are in this glass case that permits to be seen. Recently a little piece was brought by Russian spacemen in the space: half is kept in the "City of the Stars" near Moscow, the other one is kept in the Basilica.

