

SAINT BLASE AND OTHER OBSCURE WORTHIES OF THE CHURCH

by David Allen White

February 2 is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also called the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin, and also called Candlemas, because of the blessing of candles and a procession of candles which traditionally takes place on this day. I have written about this feast day before, so this month I'd like to look at what happens the day after. February 3 is the feast of Saint Blase, who was Bishop of Sebaste in Armenia and was martyred in 314 or thereabouts. The story is told that as he was being led to his death, he noticed a boy choking on a bone, and he broke away from his captors, removed the bone from the boy's throat, and then returned to bondage to be led away. As a result, he is considered the patron of sore throats and other respiratory ailments. In some churches, worshipers kneel at the altar to have their throats touched by a pair of crossed candles as the priest says a blessing. I have attended this ceremony once in an Episcopal church in San Francisco.

Saint Blase is one of the Church's fourteen Holy Helpers, saints who are said to have special powers of intercession on behalf of those suffering on earth. While this is not an official teaching of the Anglican Communion, it is nevertheless one of the many things that make Christianity so interesting.

Saint Acatius is invoked against false accusations. He was a bishop in Lower Armenia and gave such convincing testimony for Christ at his trial that his persecutors for a long time left him undisturbed.

Saint Barbara is invoked against fire and lightning because the torches that were used to burn her at the stake went out as soon as they came near her. Ultimately she was beheaded, but the officer who carried out the sentence was struck by lightning on the way home. Modern scholars doubt this story and she has been removed from the Roman Martyrology.

Saint Blase, as mentioned, is invoked against diseases of the throat.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria is invoked by learned people against their peculiar difficulties. What could those be, I wonder. She was highly educated in the arts and the sciences and though raised a pagan, dedicated her life to Christ, remaining a virgin. She was put to death on a spiked wheel. There are some doubts about her historicity.

Saint Christopher is invoked in the aid of travelers. It is said that he carried a small child across a river and the child was then revealed to be Jesus Christ. Stories of his martyrdom are inconsistent and modern scholars now consider him legendary.

Saint Cyriacus the Deacon prays that the clergy may not neglect their duties. He was converted from Judaism and ministered to slaves. He was one of twenty-seven saints who bear this name, so details of his life are uncertain.

Saint Denys is invoked against mental disorders and headaches. He was decapitated in the year 250, but picked up his head and walked ten kilometers while preaching a sermon. Did I

mention that there is some doubt about this story? A saint who survives decapitation and carries his head is called a cephalophore. Did you know that word before? There are several of them in Church history.

Saint Erasmus the Sailor, also called Saint Elmo, is invoked against abdominal pain and in aid of sailors. Delicacy prevents my describing his martyrdom. (I'm not making this up, you know!)

Saint Eustace the Adventurer is the patron of huntsmen and of those who live dangerously. He is said to have been roasted alive, with his wife and children, inside a bronze statue of a bull. The Roman Catholic Church now says that this story is completely false.

Saint George is the one on whom soldiers call in the hour of battle. He is said to have killed a dragon, and though this is regarded now as a legend, there is little doubt that he existed. He was a soldier and was martyred in 313.

Saint Giles is the advocate of good workmen, beggars, and the disabled. He was a hermit and was kind to animals, but I could find no specific association of him with these causes. He died in 710.

Saint Margaret, the maiden who overcame the dragon, is invoked by the fearful. She is known as Margaret of Antioch, not to be confused with Margaret of Scotland. There are doubts that she ever existed, but you would do well to keep those doubts to yourself when visiting the

Church of Saint Margaret in Westminster, which is dedicated to her, and not speak them out loud as I once did.

Saint Pantaleon the Physician is patron of those who care for the sick. He is said to have miraculously healed a blind man by invoking the name of Jesus over him. Someone by this name was martyred in 303, but it is not certain that they were the same man.

Saint Vitus helps those who are infirm in limb. He was martyred in 303. In some places his feast day (15 June) is kept by dancing before a statue of him, and the term Saint Vitus Dance was later applied to a neurological disorder better known as Sydenham's chorea. Interestingly, my mother, who was born on 15 June, suffered from this malady as a child.

According to the Anglican Breviary, devotion to the Holy Helpers is an evidence of belief in the spiritual commonwealth of those on earth with the saints in heaven. The stories of the Holy Helpers is also evidence that the Church has occasionally turned legendary figures into real people when they were helpful in illustrating Christian virtues.