

Bottoms Up to St Goncalo, the Saint of Hemorrhoids

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Fresh from the fertile imagination of the Portuguese comes this illumination and boon to mankind: Saint Goncalo.

In its infinite wisdom the Catholic Church has assigned certain curative powers to yet another saint, this time assigning the power to cure hemorrhoids to Saint Goncalo. Yes, that's right, piles. People are flocking to a church in Murtoza, Portugal, the Saint's birthplace. For maximum efficacy, people are exposing their behinds to a statue of the saint. The statue is also considered a cure for pimples. One badly afflicted woman wanted to pray naked in the church, but the local priest stopped it.

Goncalo is not the only saint which the Church had endowed with miraculous curative powers. St. Apollonia, for example, whose jaw had been smashed by her executioner, became the proper saint to approach with a toothache. Similarly, St. Blaise, who had been beheaded under the reign of Licinius, was seen as the intercessor for sore throats. St. Bartholomew, who had been flayed alive, became the protector of tanners. St. John, who had been plunged in boiling oil, became the patron of candlemakers. And Mary Magdalene, who had washed Christ's feet with aromatic oils, became the patroness of perfumers!

There's more. From the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, the cult of the saints grew to extraordinary proportions. Indeed, by the millennium, more than twenty-five thousand saints had been canonized! The staggering increase came about because local bishops were given the right on their own authority to proclaim any departed believer a saint after a mandatory investigation into the character of the person's life and proof of his/her wonder-working ability. For this reason, many saints were canonized on the basis of spurious evidence-some merely as a result of folklore.

Take the example of St. Christopher. Was he a product of folklore? To a great extent, yes. The real St. Christopher was an obscure martyr from Asia Minor who died during the reign of Roman Emperor Diocletian (245-313). Medieval authors developed the scant facts of this martyr's life into a full-blown fiction concerning a cannibalistic giant named Reprobos who became converted to Christianity and labored for the rest of his days as a pious and mild-mannered ferryman. One day a child appeared at the stream, and when Reprobos hoisted him onto his shoulders to carry him across, he almost buckled under the child's tremendous weight. Later, it was revealed to the ferryman that the child was Christ himself, burdened by the sins of the world. Hence, the name of Reprobos was changed to Christophorus or „Christ-bearer." Another legend held that a drop of Christopher's blood healed the wound of a king who was attempting to execute him. This story gave rise to the belief that anyone who beheld the image of Christopher would be free from harm that day, and so Christopher became the patron saint of travelers. After researching such accounts, the Church authorities deemed them legendary and, in 1968, removed Christopher's feast day from the Christian calendar.

Another example, this one as bizarre as you could find, is that Buddha was canonized as a Christian saint. The story of Buddha was carried by Crusaders and merchants from the East and passed into the tradition of the medieval Church as the life of St. Josaphat (not to be confused with the seventeenth century Polish bishop by that name who was canonized in 1867). The name of the medieval Josaphat is probably a corruption of bodhisattva, an attribute of a future Buddha.

The calendar of saints got so out of hand that in the seventeenth century, the Church commissioned a remarkable group of Jesuit scholars called the „Bollandists" to separate fact from fiction in the lives of saints. Due to their efforts-efforts which persist to this day-thousands of bogus saints, including most recently St. Philomena, were removed from official hagiographies (lives of the saints).

The legend of Philomena actually dates from the early nineteenth century. A glass vial that was said to have contained the blood of a martyr was found in a catacomb. The vial bore the inscription: *Lumena-paxte-Fi*. This was mistranslated to read „Philomena, peace be with you." Almost overnight, an elaborate biography of this newly found saint was concocted out of thin air. Devotion to St. Philomena ran high and her cult became extremely popular.

In 1968, Bollandist scholars, relying on the findings of archaeologists, were able to convince the Vatican that the word *lumena* did not refer to a person but was a conventional expression such as „beloved one" found on ordinary tombs. The vial, they argued, was also a commonplace object, used to adorn a final resting place.

Oh, by the way, did you know that St. Vitus is the patron saint of comedians? I wonder if he's still laughing at the Church for all this pious nonsense?

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