

The Real Story Behind the Church's Tradition of Blessing Throats

Zoe Romanowsky | Feb 03, 2016

Calling on St. Blaise for throat ailments, among other things, goes way back

Through the intercession of St. Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God deliver you from every disease of the throat and from every other illness, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

—Prayer from the Blessing of the Throats

Years ago a priest told me that when he was a young boy, his brother began choking on a bone. Panicked, his mother called aloud for the help of St. Blaise, and immediately the bone cleared and everything was fine. Whether the boy was truly in grave danger or not, I don't know, but the story is similar to one of the most famous legends about St. Blaise: supposedly, while he was in prison for refusing to renounce his faith, he miraculously cured a little boy who was choking to death on a fish bone.

Very little is actually known about this early Christian martyr, however. The first reference we have of him is in the medical journals of a court physician named Aëtius Amidenus, from the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century, where St. Blaise is mentioned as being called upon for treating objects stuck in the throat.

We also know that Blaise was the bishop of Sebaste in Armenia and suffered martyrdom under Licinius about AD 316. But as far as details about his life, we must rely on various traditions. Supposedly, this early Christian martyr was born to noble

and wealthy parents who provided him with a Christian education. He became a physician and was elected and consecrated a bishop at a young age. During the persecution of Licinius, a former ally of Constantine who began persecuting the Church, Blaise experienced a call to live as a hermit in a cave outside of town, where he was known to heal sick and wounded wild animals. Eventually he was discovered by hunters who were roaming the countryside capturing creatures to use in the amphitheater games. Blaise was taken to Agricolaus, the governor of Cappadocia and Lesser Armenia, and thrown into jail.

One legend has it that on his way to prison, Blaise commanded a wolf to release a pig belonging to a woman who begged for the holy bishop's help. She later brought candles to his cell so he would have light to read the Scriptures. While Agricolaus was reportedly impressed with Blaise's miracles, it didn't stop him from insisting that the bishop renounce his faith and when he wouldn't, the governor had him beaten, tortured with an iron comb (a tool used for combing wool), and beheaded.

As the manuscripts from Aëtius Amidenus show, by the sixth century St. Blaise's intercession was being invoked in the east for illnesses related to the throat. By the ninth century, the saint was also revered in Europe and went on to become one of the most popular saints in the Middle Ages, venerated as one of the "Fourteen Holy Helpers" (which also included saints such as St. Christopher, St. Erasmus, St. Denis of Paris, St. Barbara, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Giles.)

Churches were named for St. Blaise and altars were dedicated to him. Pope Leo IV is said to have presented relics of St. Blaise to Duke Wolfenus of Rheinau, Germany in 855, who brought them home from Rome with him. Other relics of St. Blaise are reported to be in Braunschweig, Germany, as well as in Paris.

In 971, in present day Dubrovnik, St. Blaise reportedly appeared to the city's inhabitants to warn them of an impending attack by the Venetians. Ever since, Dubrovnik has honored him as its patron. A statue of the saint stands over the entrance gate to the city and the cathedral there has an array of Blaise's relics.

In time, the custom of blessing the throats of the faithful developed, with priests holding two tapered candles — blessed the day before on Candlemas, Feb 2 — over the head or the throat while invoking the intercession of St. Blaise against any ailment of the throat and body.

It's an ancient custom of the Church to bless the sick, rooted in the ministry of Christ and his apostles. According to the *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*

The annual blessing of throats is a traditional sign of the struggle against illness in the life of the Christian. The blessing is ordinarily given during Mass or a celebration of the Word of God on February 3, the memorial of St. Blaise, following Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

While ailments of the throat are the main thing for which St. Blaise is invoked in the West, he is also considered a protector against wild animals, a protector of cities and a patron of veterinarians, wool-combers and the wool industry. His feast in the Eastern Church is celebrated on February 11.

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