

Saints and Ophthalmology: A Pattern for Emulation, A Model of Healing, and Physicians in Action

Ahmad M Mansour* and Walid A Medawar

Departments of Ophthalmology and Internal Medicine, American University of Beirut Medical Center, Rafic Hariri University Hospital, Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

From the earliest times, medical practitioners have sought divine help and support to aid them as they go about their busy rounds. In Christian Europe of the High Middle Ages, saints played a central role in the everyday life of the ailing. Alongside healing attempts which involved magic, folk or scientifically-based medicine, the invocation of specific patron saints for the curing of ailments was a widespread practice. The miracles of vision performed by saints over the past two millennia are listed and interpreted by various reviewers along faith healing, spontaneous recovery, or physicians acting as saints. The individuals honored as patron saints of medicine were practicing physicians who served their patients and their communities well. It is their role as saints to represent the spiritual element in the healing process as well as personifying the charitable idealism of the good physician, and therefore are models for humanitarian physicians, with the ultimate model of healing being Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Blindness; Faith healing; Miracles; Saints; Spontaneous cure

Introduction

Since Antiquity, medical practitioners have invoked divine help to assist them in the care of the sick. Throughout the history of the Church, this invocation of help was mediated by various saints associated with specific diseases. Based on Medline review conducted up to 2008, we present an overview of patron saints for systemic disorders, for ophthalmic diseases, and present the miracles attributed to various saints explaining them by spontaneous cure, faith healing, or cure by expert medical practitioners.

Major Saints for Medicine

There are nearly 300 saints whose names are associated with diseases or cure of the sick and this relationship has come about either by some miracle attributed to them or by some aspect of their martyrdom [1-7]. Some diseases have a number of saints as patrons [2] and some saints have many different patronages [1]. In the early Christian era, 4 individuals were singled out as patron saints of medicine, and particularly of physicians and surgeons. These men were all natives of Asia Minor; they were all educated in the Greek medical tradition; and they were all busy practitioners. They were the Apostle Luke, St Cosmos, St Damian and St Panteleimon.

St Apollonia [4] is the patron saint of sufferers from toothache. Blaise is the patron for those suffering from throat ailments. Peregrine is the patron saint of all cancers. Thirteen saints are related to breast disease mainly Agatha, Bernard, and Barbara (the patron saint of sufferers of breast pain). Sebastian and Roch are the plague saints. Fiacre is the patron saint for venereal diseases and rectal diseases. St Marinai is the protectress of Nephrology (also called Margarita, patron of kidney sufferers). Antony is the patron of sufferers of Saint Antony's Fire related to erysipelas and ergotism. Jude is the patron saint of hopeless cases [1]. St Liberius is the saint for Urology. Several saints are venerated in Christian tradition as protectors from leprosy [3], and this includes St Elizabeth in Hungary and St Damien in Hawaii. The most famous patron of patients with epilepsy is St Valentine.

Saints for Eye Diseases

Since early Christianity, St Lucia remained the most important saint helping in eye diseases [5,6]. St Lucia is celebrated in the Catholic Church in Italy and Spain on the 13th of December. On the same day St Ottilie or Odilia is celebrated in Germany, Austria and France, that means that she takes the place of St Lucia in this area as the special saint for eye disorders. St Lucia was born in Sicily

and dedicated her life to Jesus. She was tried and accused of being a Christian by a tyrant in Syracuse. During the torture, she asked the prefect what on her pleased him most and he responded "your eyes". She plucked out her eyes and sent them on a silver dish to her torturer. From then on she was also the patron saint of the blind. Other saints for eye diseases included Clara de Assissi [5], Odilia (or Ottilie) from Germany [5], Erhard von Regensburg [8], Leodegar [8], and Hieronymus [8].

Miracles, Spontaneous Cure, Faith Healing, or Skilled Physicians

The phenomenon of miracle has been present in each time period and each civilization, and what has changed was not its definition but its content [9]. According to Biblical Studies Foundation, a miracle is an unusual and significant event that requires the working of a supernatural agent and is performed for the purpose of authenticating the message or the messenger. Throughout the Bible, miracles were used by God to visually represent His divine power and authority over man and nature. From time to time, God also empowered His followers to use miracles in order to authenticate their commission as teachers.

Can miraculous healings be equalized with "spontaneous remissions" from modern medical terminology? Following the trace of most medieval miracle accounts, Muzur used the term "spontaneous cure" [9] and suggestive therapy [3] after finding clear examples of failed or incomplete healings, relapses, and the cases of saints who themselves were passing through the process of illness.

Moog and Karenberg [10] presented the English translation of a remarkable case report from the 13th century. A collection of miracles ascribed to St Francis contained the story of a young monk suddenly afflicted by a neurological disorder characterized by hemiplegia,

***Corresponding author:** Ahmad M Mansour, MD, Clinical Professor, Department of Ophthalmology, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon, Tel: 9611-374625; E-mail: ammansourmd@gmail.com

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speech problems and confusion. St Francis' appearance led to complete recovery. Retrospective neurological diagnoses ranged from a prolonged ischemic neurological deficit to psychogenesis. This case history was a rare example of faith healing in its contemporary context.

In ninth and tenth centuries, monasteries had hospitals where miraculous cures occurred under the hands of medical personnel like in St Gallen monastery [11]. Experienced physicians and surgeons took on the form of the saints and proceeded to real treatment or operations during the incubation of the patients at night in infirmaries adjacent to the churches. Based on the hagiographical texts, some operations like cataract surgery [12,13] were carried out.

The individuals honored as patron saints of medicine were practicing physicians who served their patients and their community well [12-14]. It is their role as saints to represent the spiritual element in the healing process as well as personifying the charitable idealism of the good physician, and therefore are models for humanitarian physicians, with the ultimate model of healing being Jesus Christ.

History of Church in Healing

After Christianity took over, the work and activities of the healing gods of the national pantheon, such as Asclepius, Amphiaras, Dioskouros and others were replaced by various saints, such as Theodore, Artemios, Febronia, Minas, Demetrius, Therapon, Pantelaeimon, Nicholas, Thecla and others [12]. Faith in healing shrines, laying on of hands, saintly relics, prayer, making the sign of the cross, exorcism, and shrines dedicated to the appropriate saints were the accepted paths to healing. Lascaratos, et al. [12,13] presented evidence that in medieval times, skillful physicians took on the form of the saints and proceeded to real treatment or operations during the incubation of the patients at night in infirmaries adjacent to the churches. This was also supported by Willam [8] and Bischoff and Speiser [11]. Based on the hagiographical texts, some operations like cataract surgery [12,13], incision of tonsillar abscess, and removal of foreign body from ear or pharynx were carried out.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed an erosion of the role played by the church in healing. Magical practices mediated by the church were replaced by the resources of medicine. This represented an important cultural development and it is often regarded as a manifestation of increasing secularization, the decline of magic and rise of science. According to Webster [15], Paracelsus (Theophrast von Hohenheim, 1493-1541) played an important part in the argument concerning the miraculous powers of saints. The question of miraculous healing was therefore important in the first, full presentation of the new system of medicine developed by Paracelsus. By eliminating the miraculous intervention of saints and promoting the secularization of magic, Paracelsus was contributing to one of the important cultural changes associated with the Reformation.

According to Harvey [16] and Ziegler [17], physicians played a very important role in the theological processes known as beatification canonization in the Catholic Church. In the first millennium of the Christian era, martyrs and other individuals who lived exemplary lives of Christian perfection in the opinion of the faithful in their locale were venerated as holy persons who had already obtained heaven upon their deaths. Thus, saints and their cults were created by action of local Christian communities. Bishops gradually recognized that such action was neither in the best interests of the local community of faithful Christians nor of its Church. The creation of saints by local acclamatory action often leads to error. In the beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era, the Popes gradually centralized this theological process under their direction. In the process which was developed, physicians [16,17] were an essential group in certifying to the ecclesiastical authorities that a physical cure produced by a

miracle was inexplicable by current medical knowledge.

Very recently Duffin [18], a hematologist-historian, became interested in the nature of medical miracles, following a request to write a report on a set of bone marrows that was sent to the Vatican as a possible miracle cure in a cause for canonization. Duffin [18] questioned the prevalence of medical miracles, their structure, and relationship to other official miracles that are recognized by the Church. Evidence was drawn from a variety of sources: oral testimony of pilgrims at feast day celebrations, ex voto paintings, and 160 miracle files in 67 canonization records of the Vatican Archives. Some changes can be detected through time, but the results also testify to the remarkable long duration in the healing experience: the patterns of suffering and despair, the gestures of pleading, the astonishment of the caregivers, and above all the simultaneous recourse to medicine and religion.

In conclusion, most of the miraculous healings attributed to the saints do not meet modern demands of science and medicine, but remain important as milestones in medical and religious history [18-20]. In Middle Ages, saints played a central role in the everyday life of the ailing in Central Europe. The advances in medicine in the last century led to erosion of the role of the saints in health and disease in Europe, while this role remains important in Latin America [20] and other parts of the third world.

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