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Which Saint to pray for fighting against a Covid infection? A short survey

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Abstract

Background: In the absence of a treatment still considered universally effective, and of a vaccine validated by the health authorities, we wanted to know which Catholic saint the European Christian community turned to in the event of infection with Covid-19 to request a miraculous healing.

Methodology: An online survey was carried out on a sample of 1,158 adults using social media tools.

Results: All results are presented in this research, with a few saints in the majority, and some dictated by the symptomatology of the Covid-19 infection or the personalities of certain « doctor guru ».

Conclusion: This medico-anthropological study is revealing the psychology of Western patients vis-à-vis the magic-religious means used in the fight against diseases, particularly in the epidemic/pandemic context.

Keywords: Health; Medical anthropology; Parallel medicine; Religion; Survey

BACKGROUND

The relationship between religion and medicine is well known in human communities since antiquity. Medieval medicine was based on Hippocratic and Galenic doctrines, but it was also characterized by spiritual and divine influences. So, in European countries, in Middle Ages, Saints ' invocation for the curing of diseases was an usual practice.

Despite, the spiritual and religious dimensions have deviated from medicine after the Renaissance and the Late Enlightenment, the intercession to the Saints is today again a doctrine spread both in Catholic and Orthodox Churches [1]. In particular, the Roman Catholic religion is rich in saints playing the role of intercessor between the omnipotence of the divinity and the demand for divine healing emanating from a mortal.

Since the start of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the entire planet. All territories, and therefore all human cultures, are directly implanted by this infectious agent [2]. In addition to and / or substitute for medical and medicinal care, it remains possible for any people to turn to religion [3].

We therefore wanted to know, in the community targeted by this religious context, who were the saints and / or saints specialized in the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a survey on two of the most used social networks : Twitter and Facebook. The survey was conducted between August 21 and 25, 2020. Each author posted on his Twitter and Facebook page, the following question: "Which saint you would pray for fighting against a Covid infection?". The total number of followers targeted by the question was 15,840 people (92% from Europe).

RESULTS

A total of 1,158 adult anonymous participants (mainly from France and Italy) answered to our question. For obvious ethical reason, no sex, age or cultural background are available. All results are summarized in [Table I](#).

DISCUSSION

Analyzing the results in more detail, from the survey it emerges that the majority saint is St. Rita ([figure 1](#)). From a young age, Rita of Cascia (Italy, 1381-1457) dreamed of consecrating herself to God, but she was destined to marry a violent man. Rita's patience and love changed her husband's character. After the violent death of her husband and two children from illness, Rita decided to follow the youthful desire by entering the monastery of the Order of Sant'Agostino in Cascia (Italy) [4]. Due to the difficult situations that she herself faced in her life as wife, mother and nun, today she is considered patron saint of lost causes, and she is invoked in the most difficult situations. Therefore, Saint Rita's first place clearly reflects the pessimistic and fatalistic nature of the current situation, and the lack of credit given to the therapeutic offer in the face of Covid-19.

We have also to consider that when we conducted the study, the vaccination campaign was far from starting.

In second and third place, we find respectively St Roch and Saint Sebastian, who, based on Catholic tradition, are the two principal Saints considered protectors against the plague, whose epidemic pattern has been compared to that of Covid-19.

Saint Roch and Sebastian were associated to the plague in the different ways, and their cult spread during Late middle Ages and Renaissance, when frequent plague epidemics occurred in several European Countries.

After his parents' death, Saint Roch of Montpellier (France, ca. 1350-1378) distributed his family wealth among the poor people, and started a pilgrimage to Rome (Italy). At that time, a plague's outbreak was spreading in Italy, and he stopped in Acquapendente, a little town sited about 150 km from Rome, where he helped the sick, and healed miraculously some people by the prayer and the

sign of the cross. He next visited other neighbouring cities and Rome, and everywhere the plague disappeared by his miraculous power. On the way back, Roch stopped to the city of Piacenza to assist the patients in the local hospital, but he himself contracted the plague, and was forced to leave the hospital and the city. Roch took refuge into a wood, outside the city, avoiding any contact with other people. A dog discovered his refuge and brought him a bread every day to feed him. A day, following the dog, a nobleman (who will become his acolyte) reached Roch's refuge and took care of him until his recovery [5].

Whereas it is believed that Saint Roch had actual contact with the plague, Saint Sebastian is associated with the plague only symbolically. Saint Sebastian (ca. 256-288) was one of the first Christian martyrs. Born in the actual French province of Languedoc (at that time known as *Gallia Narbonensis*) he went in Rome, where he started his military, becoming captain of the Praetorian Guards under the emperor Diocletian (244-312). Due to his subsequent conversion to Christianity, Saint Sebastian was persecuted and sentenced to death by the emperor Diocletian. Based on the Catholic tradition, he was riddled with arrows but survived miraculously. [6] Later, Sebastian presented himself before Diocletian and he was again condemned to death by beating. He is the patron saint of archers and athletes, and was also venerated as a protector from the bubonic plague. Indeed, since the time of western classical mythology, arrows have symbolised the divine punishment for various transgressions. During the Middle Ages, when the cult of Saint Sebastian started to spreading, epidemics were often considered divine punishments, and the wounds of Saint Sebastian were symbolically viewed as the *bubos* of the plague [7].

Moreover, Sebastian's martyrdom was one of the favourite subjects of depiction by famous, such as Pietro Perugino, Sandro Botticelli, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and Andrea Mantegna, contributing to the rise in the spread of his cult, especially during plague epidemics.

The results about the first three places suggest that the choice of the saint to invoke seems to be influenced mainly from the awareness about the difficulty of the current pandemic situation, and from a good knowledge of Catholic tradition by the people participating to the survey.

In addition, five other holy miracle workers are then invoked (St. Anthony the Great, St Adrian of Nicomedia, St Agricola of Avignon, St Edmond the martyr, St Quirinus of Neuss).

As an Egyptian ascetic monk, St Anthony the Great (251-356) is invoked against infectious diseases, mainly ergotism, erysipelas, and shingles, usually referred as “Saint Anthony’s fire”. Moreover, Catholic hagiography and art contributed to spread Saint Anthony’s resistance to supernatural temptation during his stay in Egyptian desert [8].

Saint Adrian (ca. 278-306) was a soldier under the Roman emperor Maximilian. After his conversion to Christianity, he was martyred together his wife. His cult is spread mainly in Northern France and Flanders [9].

Saint Agricole (630-700) was a bishop of Avignon (France), venerated as patron of storks because he prevented an invasion of these birds. Moreover, he is the patron of the city of Avignon, and he is invoked also against the bubonic plague and misfortune of all kinds [10].

Saint Edmund the martyr (also known as Saint Edmund of East Anglia) (855-870), king of East Anglia, was killed during the invasion by the coalition of Scandinavian warriors known as the Viking Great Army or the Great Heathen Army. Catholic hagiography affirms that he was beaten, arrowed, and then beheaded by Danish warriors because he refused to renounce to his Christianity [11]. The tradition claimed that, in 1217, his body was moved in the French city of Toulouse, and that, in 1628-1631, this city was saved from a plague’s epidemic by Saint Edmund’s intercession [12].

Based on the legend, Saint Quirinus of Neuss (???-116) was a Roman tribune, who converted to Christianity, and was then decapitated [13].

Interestingly, we note the presence of some saints whose choice may have been dictated by linguistic proximity with charismatic personalities linked to the fight against disease (St Didier, St Raoul: in reference to now famous Professor Didier Raoult, from Marseille), with the name linked to the taxonomy of the infectious agent (Ste Corona for *Coronaviridae* sp.), with the place of emergence

of the viral strain (St Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, a lazarist martyred in Wuhan, China, where the virus was firstly described in December 2019), or even with the possibility of an ultimate pleasure before death (St Emilion, named after a famous Bordeaux vineyard producing a prodigious nectar...).

CONCLUSIONS

This short medico-anthropological study is revealing the psychology of Western patients vis-à-vis the magic-religious means used in the fight against diseases, particularly in an epidemic / pandemic context. The survey confirms that Catholic people continue to entrust their sorrows, their anxieties and their hopes to the divinity, especially in time of global stress, mainly if it is a suddenly-presented difficulty that have changed the people's lifestyle. Moreover, the choice of the Saints to invoke is dictated by many factors such as a good knowledge of Catholic tradition, linguistic association, and personal behaviours.

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Figure 1. Image of Saint Rita depicted on her solemn coffin (1457). Monastery of Saint Rita, Cascia, Italy



Table I. List of all possible saints evoked by this population sample during this survey in the case of a Covid-19 infection

Saints	Number of people
Ste Rita	558
St Roch	268
St Sebastian	95
St Anthony the Great	89
St Adrian of Nicomedia	54
St Agricola of Avignon	32
St Edmond the martyr	26
St Quirinus of Neuss	17
Ste Corona	3
Virgin Mary	3
St Emilion	2
St Joseph	1
Jesus	1
St Expedit	1
Ste Genevieve	1
St Raoul	1
St Blaise	1
St Raven and St Rasephe	1
St Didier	1
St Rieul	1
St Anthony of Padova	1
St Jean-Gabriel Perboyre	1