

Saints-protectors from Diseases and the Sanctuary of the Mother of God at Trsat

The picture representing St. Catherine surrounded by virgins and martyrs (front page) was painted by friar Serafin Schön, in 1631, for the altar of St. Catherine in the Sanctuary of the Mother of God at Trsat near Rijeka. The church and the Franciscan monastery were built in the 15th century. The church is the oldest and best-known Croatian shrine of the Virgin Mary (1,2).

In the center of this fine painting, St. Catherine, the protectress against mouth and tongue diseases, abortion and accidents, is represented together with virgins and martyrs. One can easily recognize some of them by their characteristic attributes. St. Agatha, the protectress of nursing women and against breast diseases, holds the amputated breasts on a tray, while St. Lucia, the protectress of the eyesight and against eye diseases, holds her eyes on a tray. There are also St. Clare (the nun in the background with the host), as the protectress of the eyes, and St. Barbara (on the right, beside the tower), the protectress against fever and burns (3).

There are many different reasons why some saints have been considered protectors from diseases or disasters, or were chosen as patrons (3). Some saints were believed to have healing powers. Some were physicians themselves. The best known are the Apostle Luke, Alexander Lyonaise, Zenobius of Sidon, Dionysius, Pantaleon, Cosmas and Damian, Emilian and about fifteen others, including our contemporaries such as Giuseppe Moscati, Jacques Desiré Laval, and Riccardo Pampuri (4).

Numerous saints were considered protectors against various diseases because they suffered themselves and, in their affliction, displayed great courage and endurance. The examples are St. Frances, who had liver disease and hydrops, St. Rochus who caught plague, St. Lazarus with leprosy, St. Anthony the Hermit who had skin disease, St. Jerome who had problems with poor eyesight in old age, St. Gregorius the Great was afflicted with gout, and many others.

The powers to protect particular parts of the body were attributed to martyrs according to the torture they underwent or injury they suffered. For example, St. Apollonia, the patron saint of dentists, had all her teeth knocked out; St. Agatha, patron saint of breast disease and nurses, had her breasts cut off; St. Bartholomew was flayed alive, and St. Lawrence was burned to death over hot coals. Some of the martyrs miraculously survived the tortures and diseases, like the apostles St. John and St. Benedictus, who survived

poisoning attempt, and St. Paul who did not die after being bitten by a venomous snake (5).

The protecting powers were attributed to saints according to the meaning of their names. St. Lucia became a protectress against eye diseases since her eyes had been spared during torture. Her name derives from the Latin word *lux, lucis* (light), as a metaphor for the eyesight. Correspondingly, a protector of eyesight was St. Augustine among the Germans (*Auge*, eye), and St. Vitus (Guy), known as St. Vid among Croats and Slovenians (*vid*, eye sight) (3).

For over 700 years, countless pilgrims have been visiting the Virgin Mary's shrine at Trsat to express their gratitude for help and comfort received. Numerous notes, paintings, and votive offerings displayed in the Monastery and the chapel of votive gifts show mostly ill people praying or thanking for health. Loking at the paintings carefully, three types of motifs can be distinguish. One shows patients and their recovery. A patient usually lies in bed or on the operating table, and his or hers nearest relatives are often present, praying or thanking for the recovery. Another type of paintings depicts various dangerous situations, such as a fall, war, and especially traffic accidents of all kinds: road (coaches and cars), railway, and sea accidents (ranging from old time sailing boats caught in tempest to the Titanic and more modern ships). The third group comprises votive paintings of sacral iconography with an additional votive-medical message.

Among all the paintings, the Madonna of Trsat holds the most prominent position. She shines with kindness and comforts the unfortunate and the sick seeking help.

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- 1 Glavinich F. *Historia Tersattana, racolta delle antiche, e moderne historie, e traditioni*. Udine: Apresso Nicola Schiaratti; 1648.
- 2 Pasconi C. *Triumphus coronatae reginae Tersactensis*. Venetiis: Apud Jo, Baptistam; 1731.
- 3 Badurina A. *Beatifikacija, Kanonizacija, Svetac, Titular*. In: *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike zapadnog kršćanstva*. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost; 1990. p.142, 319-20, 554, 565-6.
- 4 Dorn V. *Liječnici-sveci*. *Bogoslovska smotra* 1974;44: 140-9.
- 5 Stein S. *Guarire con i santi... e con le erbe*. Casele Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme; 1991.