Of Heliotropes and Hemorrhoids

St. Fiacre, Patron Saint of Gardeners and Hemorrhoid Sufferers

JULIUS C. BONELLO, M.D., HUGUETTE COHEN, PH.D., ROBERT J. GORLIN, D.D.S., M.S.


During the Middle Ages, an integral part of the therapy for certain ailments included supplication to "patron" saints for possible divine intervention. Through legends surrounding his life, St. Fiacre, a 7th century Irish monk, has become the patron saint for hemorrhoid sufferers. [Key words: Saint; St. Fiacre; hemorrhoids].

INTERCESSION by either supernatural events or beings has, throughout history, enabled man to reconcile himself with the vicissitudes of life. Medieval legends, among which the stories of the saints and their miracles are included, provided medieval man with the strength to endure natural disasters and personal hardships. In a time when one's own city, occupation, and name were governed by a patron saint, one can readily see why 13th century man, harassed and frightened by disease, would turn to legends as a haven of refuge. Eventually, through popular consensus but supported by the Roman Catholic Church, certain saints were called upon to help combat certain maladies. These correlations usually were based on the life, lifestyle, sickness, or means of death of a persecuted saint.

Until 1200, these stories were written in almanacs printed and owned by the Church. In the 13th century, Jacobo Da Voragine, archbishop of Geneva, wrote the book Legenda Aurea (Golden Legends). This text of saints' lives was the most popular book of the Middle Ages, although later condemned by the Church. Today, this book still provides the most important basis for learning the manner in which history and art portray a particular saint. The book's influence still can be seen today by viewing medieval statues and grisailles, for most of these are taken directly from illustrations in the text.

For medieval man, this book not only provided means of vicariously escaping the narrow geographic boundaries and social barriers of his daily existence, but also fulfilled his desire for comfort and help in times of sickness. Of the many saints associated with illnesses, we will speak of St. Fiacre, patron saint of gardeners and hemorrhoid sufferers.

Saint Fiacre

Very little historic information is available on the Irish priest Fiachra, later known as Saint Fiacre or Fiacrius, who died August 30, 670 A.D. He lived near Meaux in the French region of Brie and his reputation as a healer of a wide variety of physical ills made him one of the most revered saints of early France. The only reputable references can be found in the Life of Saint Kilien and the Life of Saint Faron, both written in Latin in the 9th century. The anonymous author of Life of Saint Kilien refers to the existence of a monastery where an Irish saint named Fiacrius (Latin form of the Irish Fiachra) was revered. In Hildegaire's Life of Saint Faron, bishop of Meaux in the 7th century, the author mentions the bishop's gift to an Irish priest named Fefrus (popular form of Fiacrus) of an estate called Breuil, a few miles from Meaux, where a monastery-hospice was to be built.

This scant information was the starting point of a legendary account of Saint Fiacre's life, composed in 1188 by a monk for the edification of pilgrims (the Livret du Pelerinage de Saint Fiacre), and replete with descriptions of the miracles performed by the saint. Saint Faron is reported to have awarded to Fiacre the amount of land that he would be able to surround in one day by a moat dug with his own hands. Thereupon, Fiacre dragged a staff around, trees started to fall on both sides, and a ditch was dug instantaneously. In subsequent accounts of this prodigy, the staff turned into a spade, hence Saint Fiacre's reputation as the "monk with the spade" (le moine a la beche), and the patron saint of gardeners, always shown holding a spade in pictorial representations (Fig. 1). A woman who witnessed this extraordinary event denounced Fiacre to his benefactor as a sorcerer. Overwhelmed by the
woman's treachery, Fiacre sat on a stone, which immediately started to melt to the shape of his body to make him feel more comfortable. Witnessing these miracles, Saint Faron became convinced of Fiacre's sainthood, and since a woman had insulted Fiacre, no woman henceforth was allowed to enter his estate. All these miracles belong to a category well known to folklorists and designed to explain the presence of important vestiges (the moat), natural phenomena (the "melted" stone), or unusual customs (the exclusion of women).

According to the pilgrims' manual, Saint Fiacre's gift as a healer was widely known in his lifetime, attracting large crowds of pilgrims to his monastery of Saint Fiacre-en-Brie. Medical miracles continued to be performed for many centuries after his death. The cult made great strides after the publication of the manual in 1188, and after the erection in 1234 of a shrine containing the saint's remains. He had taken over patronages no other saint wanted, such as cures for hemorrhoids and diarrhea, which may account for the lack of popularity in France of "Fiacre" as a baptismal name. From the 12th century on, most miracles achieved by Saint Fiacre involved tumors shaped like a fig or "fic" (from the Latin *ficus*, meaning fig). A fic was defined as "a kind of wart or growth which gives off a smelly liquid, and often occurs in brain fractures, but usually in the behind and the shameful parts of the body. It is commonly called "Saint Fiacre's disease." The saint was referred to in jest as "the physician of fics" (le medecin des fics), "mainly the one that occurs in the behind."

A graphic description of a hemorrhoid sufferer benefiting from the saint's favors is given by Dom Ansart in his book on the pilgrimage of Saint Fiacre: "He had such a loose behind that it could not be made to recede." One of the best-known beneficiaries of Saint Fiacre's cures was Geoffroy de la Chapelle, a high official at the court of the French king, Saint Louis. He recalled that, in his youth, (i.e., the beginning of the 13th century), a fic prevented him from sitting on and riding a horse, the worst kind of hardship for a knight. He was advised to visit Saint Fiacre's shrine, where he dutifully prayed and was cured. The saint's powers also could be punitive, as in the case of the English king, Henry V, who came to France for the purpose of stealing Saint Fiacre's remains and reportedly died from hemorrhoids. Saint Fiacre is still remembered in contemporary France with the herbe de Saint Fiacre, a laxative made from the flowers of *verbascum thapsus* (mullein), and in Austria with a laxative called Fiaker-pulver.

Other ailments reported to have been cured by St. Fiacre were hemorrhages, ulcers, cankers, cancers, dysenteries, kidney stones, urinary retention, leprosy, and sterility. An illustrious devotee of Saint Fiacre, the French Queen Anne of Austria, credited the saint's intercession for the birth of Louis XIV, and the healing of the Sun King's fistula also was attributed to his pilgrimage to the saint's shrine.

These famous pilgrims point to Saint Fiacre's national celebrity in France. In 1689, he was referred to as "the public physician of all of France and above all of Brie." Most of the pilgrims came from Paris and the surround-

---

Note: The text includes footnotes and references for further reading on the subject.