



THE FEAST OF ST. BLAISE



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † January 2017

By REV. WILLIAM SAUNDERS

Unfortunately, what is known about the life of St. Blaise derives from various traditions. His feast day is celebrated in the East on Feb. 11 and in the West on Feb. 3 (although it was observed on Feb. 15 until the 11th century). All sources agree that St. Blaise was the Bishop of Sebaste in Armenia who suffered martyrdom under Licinius about AD 316. (Remember that Emperor Constantine had legalized the practice of Christianity in 313, but Licinius, his ally and co-emperor who had concurred in legalizing Christianity, betrayed him and began persecuting the Church. Constantine defeated Licinius in 324.) From here, we rely on the tradition which has been associated with our liturgical celebrations over the centuries, which does not necessarily preempt their veracity or accuracy.

In accord with various traditions, St. Blaise was born to rich and noble parents, and received a Christian education. He was a physician before being consecrated a bishop at a young age. Although such a statement seems terse, keep in mind that at that time the local community usually nominated a man to be a bishop based on his outstanding holiness and leadership qualities; he in turn was then examined and consecrated by other bishops with the approval of the Holy Father. Therefore, St. Blaise must have been a great witness of our Faith, to say the least.

During the persecution of Licinius, St. Blaise, receiving some divine command, moved from the town, and lived as a hermit in a cave. Wild animals visited, and he healed any that were sick and wounded. One day, a group of hunters gathering wild beasts for the arena in the amphitheater discovered St. Blaise and seized him. As he was being taken to the governor Agricolaus, the governor of Cappadocia and Lesser Armenia, St. Blaise encountered a woman whose pig was being seized by a wolf; St. Blaise commanded the wolf to release the pig, and it was freed unhurt.

While in prison, he miraculously cured a small boy who was choking to death on a fishbone lodged in his throat. Also, the woman whose pig had been saved brought St. Blaise candles so that his cell would have light and he could read the sacred Scriptures.

Eventually, Agricolaus condemned St. Blaise for upholding his Christian faith rather than apostatizing. He was tortured with the iron comb (an instrument designed for combing wool but was used here for shredding the skin) and finally beheaded.

By the sixth century, St. Blaise's intercession was invoked for diseases of the throat in the East. As early as the eighth century, records attest to the veneration of St. Blaise in Europe, and he became one of the most popular saints in the spiritual life of the Middle Ages. Many altars were dedicated to his honor, and even the Abbey of St. Blaise in southern Germany claimed to have some of his relics.

St. Blaise is also venerated as one of the "Fourteen Holy Helpers," a group of saints invoked as early as the 12th century in Germany and who are honored on Aug. 8: St. Denis of Paris (headache and rabies), St. Erasmus or Elmo (colic and cramp), St. Blaise (throat ailments), St. Barbara (lightning, fire, explosion and sudden and unprepared death), St. Margaret (possession and pregnancy), St. Catherine of Alexandria (philosophers and students, and wheelwrights), St. George (protector of soldiers), Sts. Achatius and Eustace (hunters), St. Pantaleon (tuberculosis), St. Giles (epilepsy, insanity, and sterility), St. Cyriac (demonic possession), St.

Vitus (epilepsy), and St. Christopher (travelers). The German Dominicans promoted this veneration, particularly at the Church of St. Blaise in Regensburg (c. 1320).

One reason for St. Blaise's popularity arose from the fact he was a physician who cured, even performing miraculous cures. Thereby, those who were sick, especially with throat ailments, invoked his intercession. Eventually the custom of the blessing of throats arose, whereby the priest held two crossed candles over the heads of the faithful or touched their throats with them while he invoked the prayer of the saint and imparted God's blessing. In our present *Roman Ritual*, the priest prays, "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." This practice continues in many parishes on St. Blaise's feast day.

While we invoke St. Blaise for his protection against any physical ailment of the throat, we should also ask is protection against any spiritual ailment — profanity, cursing, unkind remarks, detraction or gossip. St. James reminds us, "If a man who does not control his tongue imagines that he is devout, he is self-deceived; his worship is pointless" (1:26) and later, "We use [the tongue] to say, Praised be the Lord and Father'; then we use it to curse men, though they are made in the likeness of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. This ought not to be, my brothers!" (3:9-10). Therefore, may St. Blaise protect us from all evil, physical and spiritual, which may attack the throat.

Catholic Education Resource Center: Saunders, Rev. William. "The Feast of St. Blaise" *Arlington Catholic Herald*.
<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-feast-of-st-blaise.html>.