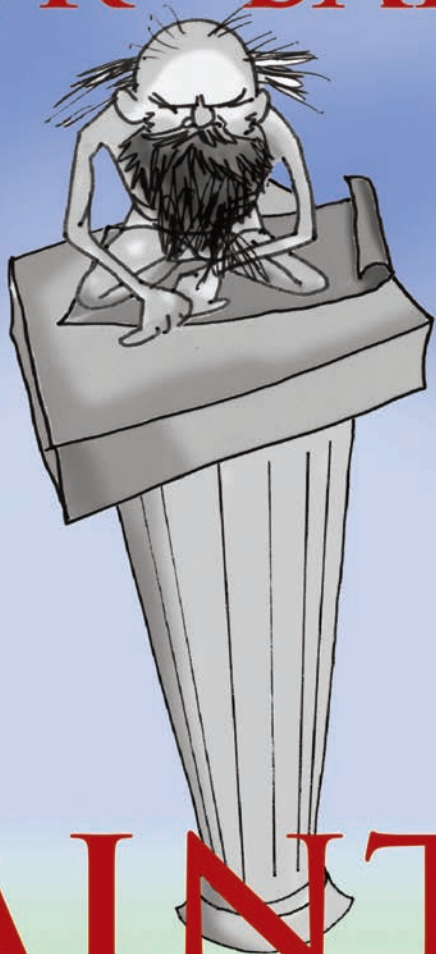


Lives of the
IMPROBABLE



SAINTS

RICHARD COLES

Illustrated by Ted Harrison

Contents

- The Juvenile Saints
- The Zoological Saints
- The Gastronomic Saints
- The Jesus And Mary Saints
- The Waterproof Saints
- The Malodorous Saint
- The Intemperate Saints
- The Saints From Beyond The Grave
- The Incarcerated Saints
- The Sartorial Saints
- The Inanimate Saints
- The Cephalophoric Saints
- The Chaste Saints
- The Most Holy And Austere Saints
- The Amorous Saints
- The Irregularly Dispatched Saints
- The Clever Saints
- The Sickly Saints
- The Unfortunate Saints
- The Faithful Saints
- The Pleasant Saints
- The Irascible Saints
- The Miraculous Saints
- The Formidable Saints
- The Entertaining Saints
- The Industrious Saint
- The Flying Saints
- The Ecclesiastical Saints
- The Miscellaneous Saints

Lives of the
IMPROBABLE
SAINTS

RICHARD COLES

Illustrated by Ted Harrison

DARTON · LONGMAN + TODD

First published in 2012 by

Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd
1 Spencer Court
140 – 142 Wandsworth High Street
London SW18 4JJ

Digital edition converted and distributed in 2013 by
Andrews UK Limited
www.andrewsuk.com

© 2012 Richard Coles and Ted Harrison

The right of Richard Coles and Ted Harrison to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Text designed by Ted Harrison and Judy Linard

INTRODUCTIONS

It is sometimes said that social media will be the death of publishing but actually this book was begat by Twitter and Facebook. One of my employers obliged me sign up to these and I found myself daily, after Morning Prayer, sitting at my desk and wondering what to post.

The answer was in front of me. The Anglican Calendar commemorates most days its saints, or quasi-saints, Anglicans being characteristically undecided about such things; other churches do the same, in fact there are a great many sources for the lives of those men and women and children – and even a baby – which Christians over the centuries have venerated for their spectacular holiness. Sometimes this holiness could be very spectacular indeed, and these are the stories to which I was most drawn; not the A-list saints, but the B's, C's and beyond, stories of such strangeness, comedy, cruelty and surprise that I found them quite fascinating.

I was not alone. Over the following weeks and months others started following their stories too and if I missed a day they would send messages insisting on updates. Naturally, I tried to oblige. The most common replies, however, to these postings are (a) surely you are making them up, and (b) surely you don't really believe this. In answer to (a), I have never made one up, though I have permitted myself a certain latitude in presenting material from ancient sources in a way my contemporaries would more readily recognise. The answer to (b) is a bit more complicated. Do I think a three-day-old baby preached a sermon before dying?; Do I think the Frankish cephalophores took their severed heads for a walk

while singing a hymn?; Do I think the Flying Friar had to be crossly summoned down from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel whence he'd floated during an audience with Pope Urban VIII? No, I don't. But I do think that all these stories, legends, and lives enabled people remote from us in time, place and custom to experience the reality of God coming into focus, experiences significant enough for them to be preserved, if sometimes haphazardly.

Moreover, I often think of a lady I once met who told me how much she admired a certain churchman for the way he 'demythologised religion'. I would very much like to re-mythologise religion, and recommend the lives of these improbable saints in that spirit. To one of the nastiest saints in the Kalendar, Tertullian, the expression 'Credo quia absurdum est' is often (wrongly) credited. 'I believe because it is absurd' will do for an epigraph.

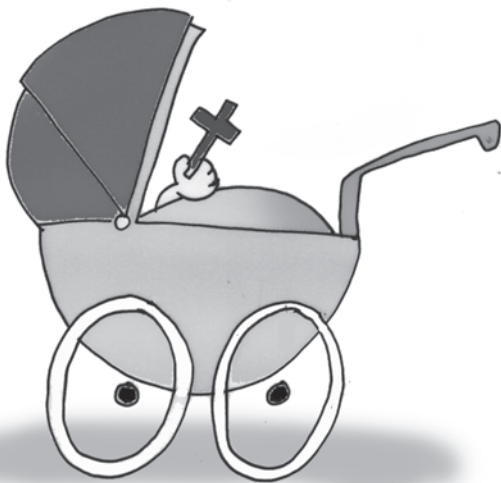
RICHARD COLES

As readers will see, the illustrations exhibit a total disregard for historical accuracy. Pedants will implode with rage and exasperation when they see the liberties taken with fashion, technology and social customs. For this I offer no apology, only the reassurance that none of the cartoons is to be taken seriously.

TED HARRISON

St Rumwold

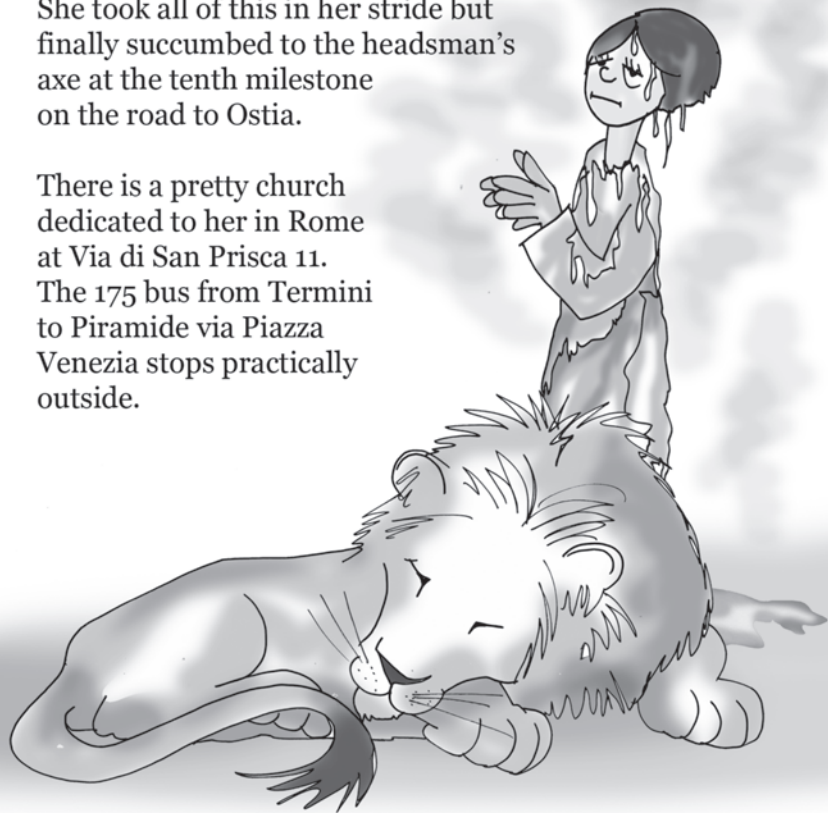
He was born in the year 662 in Northamptonshire to a Christian woman who refused to consummate her marriage to a pagan king until he converted. That taken care of, the result was Rumwold, to whom she gave birth on the way to her in-laws. The baby struggled from her womb saying, 'I am a Christian, I am a Christian, I am a Christian', recited the creed, requested baptism, predicted his own death and gave a charming sermon on the fleeting character of life. He died three days later. There was a portrait of St Rumwold in Boxley Abbey in Kent, said to be a test of a woman's chastity, for one unchaste would be unable to lift it. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries it was found that it could be secured by a hidden wooden pin. A nice little earner, I expect, for the monks. They also had the Rood of Grace, a wooden cross bearing a figure of Christ that could miraculously move and speak. It too was found to be a fake and was publicly smashed while the Bishop of Rochester read an uncompromising sermon.



Saint Prisca

A child martyr who was extravagantly venerated as such in pre-Reformation England. Born to a noble Roman family, she became a Christian aged 13, to the chagrin of the Emperor Claudius. He commanded her to sacrifice to Apollo and when she refused he had her defenestrated from the twelfth floor of a building used for such things. She survived, so was then flogged, covered in boiling tallow and thrown to a lion, which went to sleep at her feet. She was next starved and tortured on the rack, and had chunks of flesh torn from her body with iron hooks, before being thrown on a pyre. She took all of this in her stride but finally succumbed to the headsman's axe at the tenth milestone on the road to Ostia.

There is a pretty church dedicated to her in Rome at Via di San Prisca 11. The 175 bus from Termini to Piramide via Piazza Venezia stops practically outside.



St Dominic Savio

The youngest person ever to be officially canonised who wasn't a martyr. He was born near Turin in 1842 and died aged 14 in a junior seminary. He was insufferably pious and as a toddler he would drop to his knees in mud or snow to say his prayers when passing a church. He berated his schoolmates for immorality. He refused to go swimming with his friends because he thought it might excite sinful desire. When he caught them

looking at a dirty magazine he confiscated it, tore it up and gave them a long lecture on the importance of maintaining custody of the eyes.

He was a great one for visions and once saw a 'plain full of people enveloped in thick fog. They were walking about like people who had lost their way. Someone said: "This is England".' He liked gravel and fast on but never let it be known how to enjoy



so thrilled by the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, for example, that he established a Sodality in its honour with twenty-one exacting rules. He did not lead it for long. He became so determined to die young that, in spite of being quite well, he took to his bed and demanded the doctor come and bleed him. The doctor obliged, even though he thought he was in good health, and Dominic next insisted on making his Confession and receiving the Last Rites. Shortly after he asked his father to read to him the Prayer for the Exercise of a Happy Death, had a snooze, then said, 'Goodbye, Dad ... Oh, what wonderful things I see,' and died.

St Kenelm

He was born in the ninth century in Birmingham into the royal house of Mercia and succeeded his father as king when he was only seven. His sister, unfortunately, was terribly jealous of him and paid her boyfriend, Askobert, to kill him. In spite of Kenelm turning his staff into a mighty ash tree while they were out hunting, Askobert beheaded him. Then a dove came and pecked a scroll from his neckstump and flew with it to Rome where he dropped it at the feet of the Pope. It contained an account of what had happened and instructions on where to find Kenelm's body, so the Pope wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury and asked him if he would mind having a look for it. This duly happened and the body was brought to Winchcombe Abbey where his sister lived. Warned of it by a miraculous peal of bells she said, 'may my eyes pop out if this is true,' and they did, bursting onto the page of the prayer book she was reading at the time. She and her boyfriend died wretchedly and were thrown in a ditch. Kenelm's remains were buried at Winchcombe, where a custom is observed on the Feast of St Kenelm to this day. Youths pelt the poor vicar with crab apples – 'crabbing the parson'.



St Agnes

A child martyr of the Diocletian persecution, I'm sorry to say, she was first dragged through the streets to a brothel. As she prayed for deliverance from that fate worse than death her hair miraculously grew and covered her body. She was then tied to a stake and set alight, but the flames would not come near her body. Eventually she was beheaded and her supporters are said to have soaked up her blood with cloths – there was a roaring trade in these in the Middle Ages. Today she is commemorated with a picturesque ceremony at Rome. Some Trappist nuns bring two lambs' fleeces from their flocks to the Vatican for the Pope to bless. The wool is used to make pallia, a sort of yoke worn by archbishops as a sign of their authority and the Pope's jurisdiction. Interestingly, even though the Church of England came under new management five hundred years ago or so, the pallium may be still be seen in the coats of arms of the Archbishops of both Canterbury and York. Her feast day is 21st January.



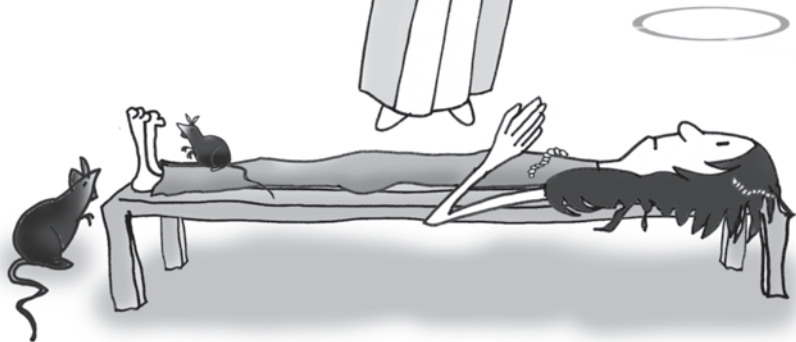
St Fina of San Gimignano

She was born in the thirteenth century to a family of impoverished nobility and lived all her short life in a tiny house in this loveliest of cities. As a child she was rather shy, very kind and devoted to the Virgin Mary but she fell ill with a ghastly sickness, which gradually paralysed her. Having impetuously accepted an orange as a love token from a soldier, which disappointed her parents, she resolved to atone for this by refusing the luxury of a bed. She lay instead on a wooden pallet to which her decaying flesh slowly grafted and was nibbled by rats and worms. After five years of this, on 4th March 1253, Saint Gregory the Great miraculously appeared in Fina's room and predicted that she would die on the twelfth of March.

exactly that, aged only 15, bells of San Gimignano anyone touching them. came to take her body found white violets from the wood. spread throughout and flower there to fiori di Santa Fina.



She did
and all the
rang without
When they
away, they
blooming
These
the city
this day:



St Blaise

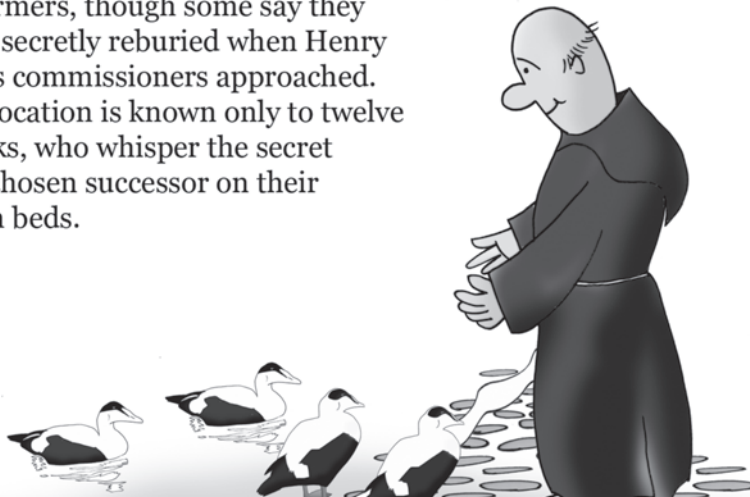
Patron saint of sore throats. He was a healer, or possibly a vet, who lived around the turn of the fourth century in what we now call Turkey. His therapies were much praised by the fifth century court physician Aëtius Amidenus. He lived in a cave where poorly animals flocked to see him and he cured them too. At his martyrdom he rebuked a wolf for being unkind to a pig and the wolf let the pig go. Blaise was then torn to pieces with the iron combs used by wool workers. For this reason he is also the patron saint of knitting. His feast follows that of Candlemas, so it is a widely observed custom to use those candles, in a cross shape, to bless the throats of the faithful, as a safeguard against streptococcal pharyngitis or choking on fish bones.



One of the country's smallest churches is dedicated to St Blaise. It is at Haccombe, near Newton Abbot in Devon. Its vicar enjoys the title of archpriest and is the only one in the Church of England.

St Cuthbert

One of the most pleasing British saints of the seventh century. Of noble birth, Cuthbert was educated in the Irish tradition that the church abandoned in favour of Roman norms after the Synod of Whitby. Cuthbert accepted the changes but retained Irish Christian characteristics, like material austerity and spiritual generosity. He travelled around on a horse, healing the sick and became known as the Wonder Worker of Britain. He was made Bishop of Lindisfarne, but like so many called to that exacting office, found it rather trying and as soon as he could, he became a hermit and moved into a cell on one of the Farne islands off the Northumbrian coast. Unfortunately people insisted on coming to see him and eventually he had to lock his door and shout at them through the window. Withdrawing from human society he became very fond of the Eider ducks so common along that coast and enacted the first bird protection laws in history. To this day in the north east they are known as Cuddy Ducks. His relics, which you may venerate in Durham Cathedral, survived the Vikings and the Reformers, though some say they were secretly reburied when Henry VIII's commissioners approached. The location is known only to twelve monks, who whisper the secret to a chosen successor on their death beds.



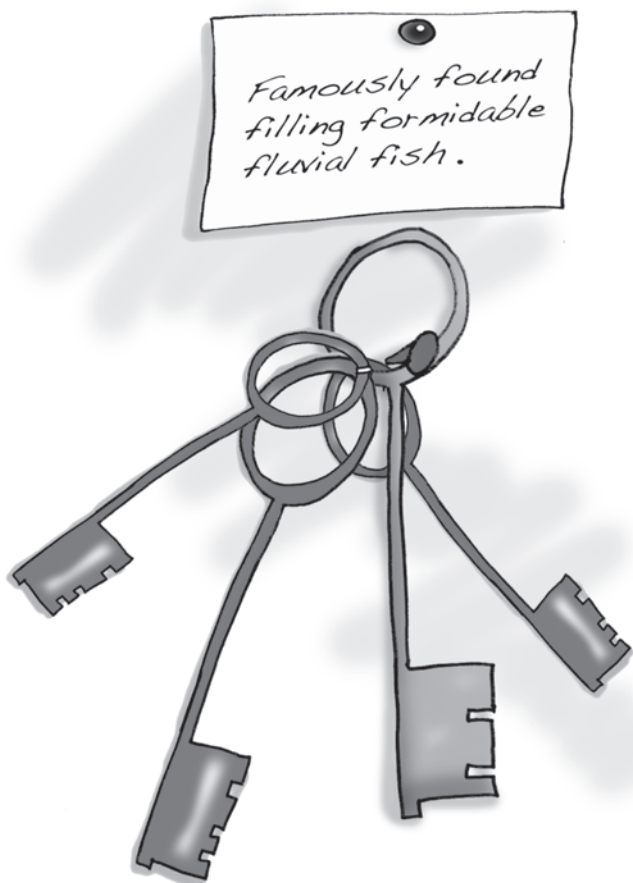
St Anthony of Padua

He was a Franciscan friar of the thirteenth century, who became known as 'Hammer of Heretics' and 'Professor of Miracles'. He was born in Lisbon, but ended up, after a shipwreck, in Padua. He was rather sickly so his brethren put him in a hermitage and gave him light kitchen duties. One day the Franciscans' great competitors the Dominicans were in town and no one had remembered to arrange a preacher so Anthony was pushed, unprepared, into the pulpit. He preached so eloquently that he became a celebrity, preaching to St Francis and then Pope Gregory IX, who called his sermons the 'jewel case of the Bible'. He once converted a horse to Christianity and, preaching one day on a river bank, was so persuasive that all the fish rose to the surface and tried to join in with the hymns. He then reattached a man's foot after he cut it off in penance for kicking his mother. It was all a bit much, so he went to live in a hut under a walnut tree. When he died aged only 36, children cried in the streets and the bells of the churches rang of their own accord. His body was dug up thirty years after he died and it was discovered that his tongue, instrument of his magnificent preaching, was still moist and pink, so they cut it out and put it on display. He is, famously, invoked by those looking for lost articles, but is also patron of the elderly, unattractive animals, swineherds, air hostesses and married people afflicted by barrenness.



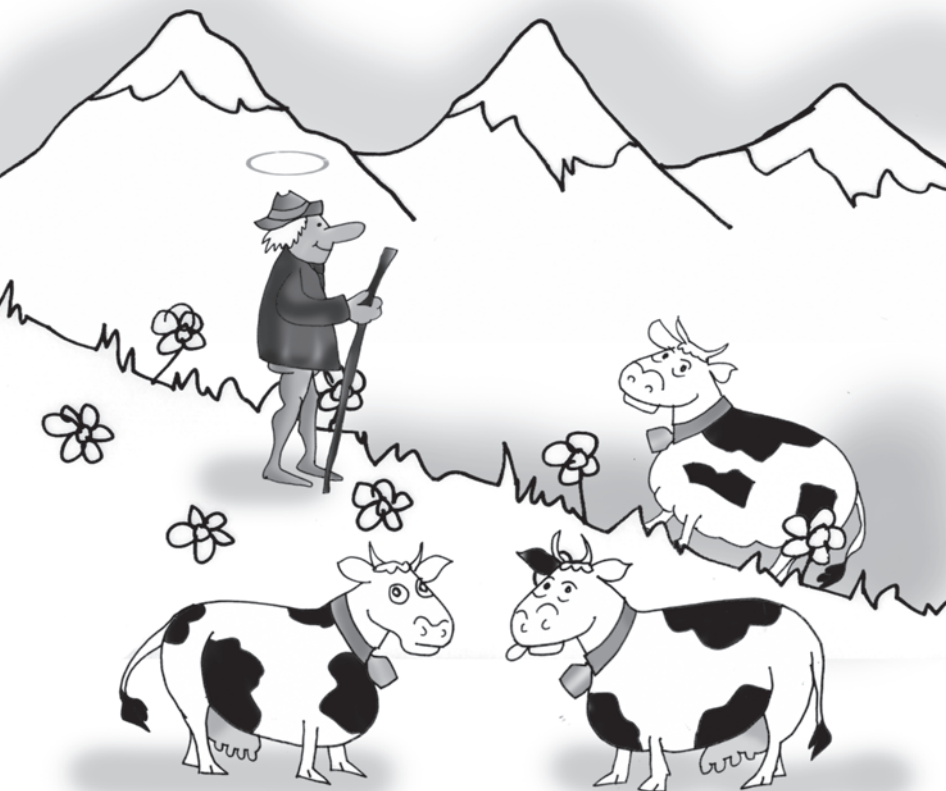
St Benno

He was an eleventh-century bishop of Meissen. Portraits often show him with a fish holding a set of keys in its mouth. There is a legend that the bishop once threw the keys of his cathedral into the River Elbe. They were later found by a fisherman inside a fish and returned. Consequently St Benno is the patron saint of fishing, but also, for reasons that are not so obvious, of alliteration.



St Bessus

He was one of the more notable Alpine thaumaturges of the third century. He miraculously raised wonderfully fat and productive cattle, which attracted the attention of some rustlers. They stole his cows, fed them to him at a banquet, then chased him up the mountain and forced him to jump to his death. His outline may still be seen at the bottom of a cliff. On his feast day a statue of the saint is carried to that same cliff, but the townspeople of Cogne and Campiglia row terribly over whose turn it is to carry him.



St Medard

Known as the laughing saint, he was a sixth century bishop from Picardy; his twin, Gildard, is also a saint and former bishop, consecrated on the same day. Medard miraculously wrested the borough of Crouy from King Clotaire, who didn't mind too much because Medard was so jolly. Birds were fond of him and he had no need of an umbrella for he was sheltered from the rain by an eagle which hovered over him in poor weather. Every year at his birthplace the most virtuous girl of the town is elected the Rosière, a custom started by Medard. Dressed in white the Rosière is conveyed by twenty-four children and two godmothers to Vespers where she is crowned with roses. Then the mayor, rather oddly, presents her with two arrows, two tennis balls and a whistle. She blows the whistle

three times and throws nuts to the assembled crowd.



St Medard is the patron of those suffering from toothache.

St Rock

He was born in Montpellier at the end of the thirteenth century, son of the governor, and bore on his breast the sign of the cross. He was so devout a baby that when his mother fasted on Fridays he would not suckle either. Aged 20 he renounced all wealth and privilege, put on sackcloth, and wandered around northern Italy, begging. He was very effective in curing the plague, making the sign of the cross over its victims who then got better. He caught the plague himself, but rather than occupy a hospital bed that could go to another, he crawled into the woods to die. There he met a friendly dog who fed the saint with food stolen from its master's table, licked his sores, and eventually arranged for him to be nursed back to health. Then he went to Piacenza where he cured poorly cows, but unfortunately got arrested by his uncle for espionage. He was thrown into jail, and for five years suffered imprisonment without revealing who he was. Then an angel brought him a golden pillow bearing a text recommending his saintly prayers as a remedy for the pestilence. Rock then died, so his jailer, Justin, kicked him to see if life was, indeed, extinct. It was, but Justin's foot deformity was immediately healed so he ran about excitedly and revealed the saint's identity, which was confirmed by the sign of the cross on his breast. Rock is now patron of dogs and second-hand clothes shops.

