



# St. Blaise, Patron Saint of Throat Ailments

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** To familiarize otolaryngologists with Saint Blaise, patron saint of diseases of the throat.

**Study Design:** Historical review.

**Methods:** The medical context, legend, and resulting veneration of St. Blaise is reviewed.

**Results:** Over 65 million Americans are Catholic (22% of the population). Patron saints are thought to be intercessors, in heaven, capable of praying to God on our behalf, for specific needs. By the Middle Ages, saints were adopted for occupations, illness, and even geography. Medical care and scientific understanding of disease was limited. Patients therefore frequently turned to religious rites. Prayer that involves repetition, such as the rosary, is akin to mediation. Such activities have been demonstrated, in some studies, to alter disease outcome. St. Blaise was a physician, bishop, and martyr in fourth century Armenia. A hagiographic tale of him healing a boy with an airway foreign body became widespread, and by the sixth century Christians in the eastern Mediterranean were invoking his intercession for throat ailments. By the medieval period his cult as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers against illness was noted throughout western Europe. The tradition of blessing candles shaped as a cross on his feast day (February 3) and praying for his protection against throat diseases continues to this day throughout the world.

**Conclusions:** Many patients gain comfort by meditation and prayer when faced with throat illness. Knowledge of St. Blaise, a major figure in many patients' religious background, may aide physicians in caring for these patients.

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## Introduction

Religion and spirituality are major influences in a substantial portion of the American population and therefore amongst the patients we treat. The 2014 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center found that 77% of Americans describe religion as very or somewhat important in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, experts in this field have found that religion and spirituality have profound effects on patient outcomes, from mental and physiologic well being to patient behaviors and overall mortality.<sup>2</sup> Studies have shown that many patients want physicians to be able to discuss religious issues with them. For example, in one survey two thirds of patients wanted their physicians to be aware of their religious beliefs,<sup>3</sup> and in another 41% of patients wished to discuss religious concerns with their physicians.<sup>4</sup>

A general knowledge of the major religious groups a physician's patients may belong to would undoubtedly be useful in this regard. Catholics comprise around one-fifth of the US population by survey and would thus come to nearly 65 million people.<sup>1</sup> Patients who self-identify as Catholic are almost certainly present in the vast majority of practices across the country.

Patron saints in the Catholic faith are believed to be intercessors in heaven who can petition God on our behalf for specific needs. Otolaryngology in particular has its own patron saint, St. Blaise. It is our hope that a discussion of his history will assist physicians in caring for a subset of their patients with greater cultural competence.

## Biography

The first mention of St. Blaise is provided by Aetius of Amidus, a Byzantine Greek physician writing in the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. He records a prayer used by Christians in the Near East for aerodigestive foreign bodies. They were to touch the patient's throat, and state, "Blasius Martyr et Servus Christi, dicit. Aut ascende aut descende. (Blaise, martyr and servant of Christ, says: come up or go down)"<sup>5</sup>

It would not be until the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE that the tradition behind this prayer was written down in works such as *Acts of Saint Blaise*. He was believed to have been a physician and bishop of Sebaste in Armenia. During a persecution under the reign of Licinius around 316 CE he was martyred for refusing to renounce Christianity. One of the miracles ascribed to him was that of saving a boy choking on a foreign body. According to the tale a mother brought her son, who had a fish bone lodged in his throat, and laid him at his feet. Saint Blaise uttered a prayer and touched the child's throat, and the child coughed the bone up and was healed.<sup>6</sup>

## Historical Veneration

Diseases of the throat were rampant in the pre-modern world. In the modern era we think of sore throats as inconveniences. We forget that before our modern era aerodigestive diseases were common and fatal. There were few effective interventions for foreign bodies until Jackson developed his endoscopic techniques. Infectious diseases such as diphtheria and epiglottitis were rampant, especially in children, until the age of vaccination and antibiotics.

One can easily see why this tale of a choking child would resonate across the Christian world. As indicated by Aetius within a few centuries of his martyrdom St. Blaise had become the patron saint to invoke for throat ailments. By the Middle Ages his veneration was widespread throughout the Christian world, both East and West.

During the Black Death of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the popularity of his veneration grew even greater as one of the 14 Holy Helpers, particularly in Germany. These were a set of saints who were felt to be particularly efficacious if called upon for aide during illness. Immigrants and missionaries through the centuries carried his veneration throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

Over time other aspects of his legend became associated with other fields as well. He is also considered the patron saint of chandlers, wool-combers, and wild animals. The city of Dubrovnik also venerates him as their patron saint. According to legend he appeared in a vision to the defenders of the city to warn them of a surprise attack in 971. Ever since the Festa Svetoga Vlaho (Festivity of Saint Blaise) has involved several communal processions and masses to venerate him. It has since been inscribed on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1 *Maitre-autel, Tableau Saint-Blaise. Eglise Saint-Blaise, Valfff, Alsace*



Figure 2 *Festa Svetoga Vlaho*



## Modern Era

Today in many different denominations of Christianity, but particularly in Roman Catholicism, Saint Blaise is still venerated, often to invoke his intercession against throat illnesses.

Perhaps most widely known is the Blessing of the Throats, held annually on Feb 3, his feast day. The priest touches the throat of each person with two crossed candles, and utters an invocation, "Through the intercession of Saint 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."<sup>8</sup>

In Germany the candles are kept lit and held over the congregation. In Hispanic countries a ribbon may be worn around the neck for 9 days. In Eastern Orthodox churches he is venerated on Sep 11 with a special service. Devotional medals are sometimes worn by those seeking his intercession<sup>5</sup>

Figure 3 *Blessing of Throats*



## Conclusions

Throughout human history religion and spirituality have manifested how and had a profound effect on how people interact with illness.

The veneration of Saint Blaise is how a large subset of our patients and their ancestors dealt with diseases of the throat

We hope that greater knowledge about his veneration will help physicians care for their patients in a culturally competent manner.

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