

Patron saints of mental illnesses with an overview of examples in Istrian ethno-medical tradition

Svetniki-zavetniki duševno bolnih

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Abstract

Objective: Define the saints who have a preventive and curative role in combating mental illnesses in Christian ethno-medical tradition, explain their connection with the illnesses, and indicate examples of patron saints of mental illnesses in Istrian sacral heritage.

Methods: Analysis of literature with registration of all the Saints in Istrian shrines, and establishing the actual situation in the field.

Results: We established the existence of ten states that we connect with psychiatric difficulties and seventeen patron saints to whom the faithful pray in their battle against mental illnesses. From this group, in Istrian saints we discover eight patron saints, where in the number of sacral elements, St. Peter the Apostle, St. Bartholomew and St. Vitus dominate. They are followed by St. Bernard, St. Francis of Paola, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Christopher and St. Ulrich. A brief overview of the hagiographic characteristics of the saints and their connection with ethno-medicine are presented.

Conclusion: Christian tradition abounds in ethno-medical elements, which today, as they once did, represent a specific approach to fighting against (mental) illnesses and a source of supportive therapeutic solutions.

Izvleček

Cilj: Določiti svetnike, ki imajo v krščanski etnomedicinski tradiciji preventivno in kurativno vlogo v boju proti duševnim boleznim, obrazložiti njihovo povezavo s temi boleznimi ter navesti primere svetnikov – zavetnikov duševno bolnih v istrski sakralni dediščini.

Metode: Analiza literature z registracijo vseh svetnikov v istrskih svetiščih in ugotavljanje dejanskega stanja na terenu.

Rezultati: Ugotovili smo obstoj desetih stanj, ki jih povezujemo s psihiatričnimi težavami, in sedemnajst svetnikov-zavetnikov, h katerim se verniki z molitvijo zatekajo po pomoč v boju proti duševnim boleznim. V tej skupini istrskih svetnikov najdemo osem svetnikov – zavetnikov, med katerimi po številu sakralnih elementov prevladujejo sv. Peter apostol, sv. Bartolomej in sv. Vid. Tem sledijo sv. Bernard, sv. Frančišek paolski, sv. Ignacij lojolski, sv. Krištof in sv. Ulrich. Prikazan je kratek pregled hagiografskih značilnosti teh svetnikov in njihova povezava z etnomedicino.

Zaključek: Krščanska tradicija je bogata z etnomedicinskimi elementi, ki predstavljajo danes, enako kot v preteklosti, poseben način boja proti duševnim boleznim ter vir podpornih terapevtskih rešitev.

Introduction

Within the context of ethno-religious but also ethno-medical traditions, the faithful have for centuries prayed to a multitude of patron saints to whom they assign preventative as well as curative powers in the battle against illnesses.¹ Such practices were particularly intensified among Christians in Europe in the second half of the Middle Ages, where praying to the saints represented an everyday act of the faithful.² Namely, given the lack of efficient medical knowledge and great epidemics, primarily the plague, the inhabitants of Europe, at the time, had no other alternative but to turn to the saints with prayers and intercessions.³ While some holy individuals, like Jesus Christ or the Blessed Virgin Mary, were »universal helpers« with a whole spectrum of human illnesses, in time some of them became »specialised« for groups of diseases or a specific disease.⁴ Most frequently they became patron saints according to hagiographic cha-

racteristics: associations with diseases they suffered from themselves or according to the linguistic correlation of the name of the Saint with the organ and disease (onomastic association).^{1,5,6}

Istria, a peninsula in the northern Adriatic, is for many reasons one of the most interesting Mediterranean regions. Geographically it is a relatively small area, it abounds with historical, ethnological, cultural and ethno-medical features and specificities.^{7,8} Similarly, in Istria there is a many centuries old tradition of Christianity, belief and worship of patron saints.⁹ In accordance with this, the masses from the very beginning built and consecrated numerous sacral buildings, shrines, which aside from a religious function, also had a type of medical role.¹⁰ Although part of the ethno-medical folklore of the Istrian people has been systemised, analysed and publicised, particularly in the case of “somatic” diseases, those mental ones with psychiatric entities still need to

Table 1: Overview of patron saints of mental illnesses.

Psychiatric entity	Patron saints	Feast day
Alcoholism	St. John of God	8 March
Emotional distress	St. Francis of Paola	2 April
Remorse	St. Ignatius of Loyola	31 July
Obsession	St. Bernard	20 August
	St. Cyriacus	6 March
	St. Geminian	31 January
	St. Petar the Apostle	29 June
Phobias, fear	St. Didacus of Alcala	13 November
Anxiety	St. Agathius	22 June
	St. John Cassian	13 August
Mental illnesses	St. Acharius	27 November
	Bartholomew the Apostle	24 August
	St. Bernard	20 August
	St. Christopher	25 July
	Raphael the Archangel	29 September
Insomnia	St. Vitus	15 June
Delirium	St. Ulrich	4 July
Depression	Job	10 May



Figure 1: Main altar consecrated to St. Peter and Paul in the parish church of St. Peter and Paul; Sveti Petar u Šumi (Istria)

be discovered and presented. In saying this, it should be mentioned that Škrobonja and Muzur have researched the closely associated phenomenon of headaches.¹¹ The topic becomes more current given that the World Health Organisation has recognised the importance of including spirituality in the contemporary concept of defining health. Along with biopsychosocial wellbeing, in recent years there has been intensive research and implementation of the component of spirituality as a prerequisite for all-encompassing healthy existence.¹² In this context, methods of spiritual psychiatry become noteworthy, as they with their spiritual characteristics, practicing of meditation or prayer may serve patients as a supportive means in their fight against physical and mental illnesses. Due to

the aforementioned, the objective of this research is to declare the patron saints of mental illnesses, present them through specific examples that we find in Istrian sacral heritage as well as to point out this widespread practice of combating illnesses.

Methods

In the preparation and realisation of this work, first and foremost, the research methods of gathering data from the available literature, general, encyclopaedia and lexicographic editions were used. This was followed by a review of hagiographic and expert psychiatric literature and published works on a similar topic. The specificity of this research is the drafting of a detailed list of all the saints that appear in Istrian sacral buildings, and establishing the actual situation in the field.

Results

Exploring the connection between spirituality and psychopathology, we come upon at least three obstacles. The first refers to the lack of understanding of the cause of mental illnesses and their association with supernatural and »impure« forces.¹ Another obstacle is the non-existence of quality classifications of mental illness up to the end of the 19th century.¹³ That is why contemporary nomenclature of psychiatric entities or illnesses for individual patron saints will be absent, and will often be stated under a broader name. The third obstacle is the stigma that accompanies psychological illnesses even to the present day.^{14,15} All these are reasons why we do not come across a large number and wide spectrum of churches dedicated to the patron saints of mental illnesses.

Upon reviewing the hagiographic literature, the existence of ten states that we connect with psychiatric difficulties were established.^{1,16} They deal with general mental illnesses, alcoholism, phobias, anxieties, depression, delirium, emotional pain, obsession, insomnia and remorse. In doing so, seventeen patron saints connected to the aforementioned states were defined (Table 1).

As evident in Table 2, out of the seventeen earlier defined patron saints in Istrian sacral buildings, we have found eight of them.¹⁰ We have found them in the form of consecrated shrines, but also on the main and side altars paintings or statues. In numbers, St. Peter the Apostle (Figure 1) dominates, whose religious existence is established in forty-eight shrines of the broadest time of construction: from early Christian times

all the way up to the 20th century. They are found in Istrian towns, such as Buje, Buzet, Labin, Motovun, Medulin, Novigrad, Rovinj, Savudrija and Vrsar... St. Peter the Apostle is followed by St. Bartholomew with ten, St. Vitus with five and St. Bernard with two shrines. We have found the other four in one shrine each: St. Francis of Paola, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Christopher and St. Ulrich.

Table 2: Overview of patron saints of mental illnesses in Istria and their churches.

Saint	Church-consecration	Name of parish	Locality	Year of construction
St. Francis of Paola	Hadrian	St. Bartholomew	Tupljak	1796
St. Ignatius of Loyola	St. John and Paul	St. John and Paul	Šumber	1672
St. Bernard	St. Bernard	St. Bernard	Funtana	1621
	Blessed Virgin Mary	St. Roch	Galižana	1914
St. Bartholomew	Holy Trinity	Holy Trinity	Brest	1878
	St. Bartholomew	St. Martin	Raša	XVI century
	St. Bartholomew	St. Stephen	Motovun	1561
	Blessed Virgin Mary	Blessed Virgin Mary	M. Novaki	1875
	St. Bartholomew	St. Barbara	Sv. Bartul	XIII century
	St. Bartholomew	St. Bartholomew	Roč	1492
	St. George	St. John the Baptist	Letaj	renovated in 1988
	St. Michael	St. Martin	Frata	XIII century
	St. Bartholomew	St. Bartholomew	Tupljak	XIV century
St. Christopher	St. Roch	St. Michael	Žminj	1381
	St. Roch	St. Peregrine	Umag	1514
St. Vitus	St. Vitus	Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary	Buzet	1653
	St. Vitus and St. Modestus	St. Phillip and James	Filipana	XVIII century
	St. Vitus	St. Vitus	Gračišće	1769
	St. Vitus and St. Modestus	St. Vitus and St. Modestus	Grožnjan	1600
	St. Vitus	Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary	Pazin	1461
St. Ulrich	St. Ulrich	St. Michael	Paz. Novaki	XVII century



Figure 2: St. Vitus—patron saint of Rijeka; relief in stone pillar for the city flag in Rijeka

Here we shall present in detail the characteristics of the eight mentioned patron saints and their connection with ethno-medical functions:^{1,3,8}

St. Peter the Apostle: After his encounter with Jesus, Peter becomes the first of the twelve Apostles – the “rock” upon which Christianity will be built. So, upon arriving in Rome, he shall become the first bishop and founder of the first Christian community. In the time of the first persecution of the Christians, he was arrested and crucified. Peter is the protector against obsession but also fevers, leg pains and snakebites. The

reason for invoking St. Peter in fevers is based on the Gospel records about Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law when she suffered from fever. On the other hand, the invoking due to obsession, pain in the legs and snakebites probably ensues from his missionary activities.

St. Bartholomew is one of the twelve Apostles, who preaching the Gospel travelled all the way to India. While on his last trip, he was tortured in Armenia, skinned alive and crucified on a cross. Aside from miraculous “butter of St. Bartholomew” (fresh butter with daisy petals and marshmallow flowers) which treats wounds, Bartholomew is also associated with ethno-medicine as a protector against mental illnesses, epilepsy and skin illnesses. The association with skin diseases ensues from the form of his torture, while the connection with brain illnesses is iconographic. Namely, through frequent portrayals of the saint as a horseman on a white horse suggest victory over impure forces and the demonic illnesses of “convulsions”.

St. Vitus (Figure 2) as a young man gained the status of a healer, as such he also healed Diocletian’s son from epilepsy. Rather than being rewarded for this but he was thrown into a dungeon and sentenced to death. In this case he was neither harmed by wild animals among which he was thrown, nor by hot resin and molten lead in a cauldron. St. Vitus is the protector against insomnia, Huntington’s disease, epilepsy, eye diseases and bites of poisonous animals. He is a favourite among the Slavs (onomastic connection of the name and organ), and due to “exorcising the devil” from Diocletian’s son, he is also invoked due to illnesses connected to demonisation.

St. Bernard is known as one of the most spiritual leaders in the history of the Church. He lived and worked in France in the 12th century, where owing to his impressive sermons he gained an enviable reputation among the masses and clergy. After his death he became the protector against mental illnesses and demonic obsession, on the basis of a prayer in which he invokes from God protection against “blindness” caused by demonic forces.

Figure 3: Unknown artist (18th century): St. Ignatius of Loyola, oil painting, St. Vitus Cathedral, Rijeka



Saint Francis of Paola lived in the 15th century. As a young man, with a group of like-minded individuals, he founded a monastery in which an order of followers quickly developed, which was characterised by strictness and ascetic life. That is why they were called “Minims” (the smallest or the least). *St. Francis of Paola* is the protector against mental illness, plague and infertility, primarily because of his charity work and spreading of mercy, but also because of help given during the plague epidemic in Naples and Frejus.

St. Ignatius of Loyola (Figure 3) lived at the turn of the 15th and 16th century. While serving in the army he was wounded and decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and later to study theology. He was inspired by missionary ideas and in 1534 founded the Society of Jesus, which was characterised by thorough study, education of the young and missionary activities. *St. Ignatius of Loyola* is the protector against remorse, fever and appendicitis. Remorse connects

him with successful overcoming of great life doubts, appendicitis with operation to which he was subjected, and fever probably due to onomastic association of his name (*Lat. ignis = fire*).

Saint Christopher was active in Palestine in the 3rd century. According to beliefs, he was a very tall and strong person, and carried Jesus Christ across a river when he appeared to him. That is how he got his name (Greek *Kristophoros = Christ bearer*). *St. Christopher* is the protector against mental illnesses, epilepsy, muscle weakness and the plague. While the muscle weakness connection is obvious, the associations with brain illnesses and plague are not fully understandable (probably due to being impressed by his size).

St. Ulrich was born at the end of the 9th century in Augsburg and is one of the most venerated saints in Germany. He gained his reputation not only through his calling as a priest and honour of bishop, but rather through his public, political and even military activities. *St. Ulrich* is the protector against delirium, headaches, cholera and children’s illnesses (according to the legend that he brought a dead child back to life).

Discussion

The overview of the patron saints of mental illnesses and entities that are connected with them, and “local” examples from Istrian sacral heritage, emphasise the presence of hagiotopographic elements in the ethno-medical tradition of Christianity. They include numerous prayers, invocations and intercessions of saints, examples of miraculous healings and cures.¹⁷ However, in the case of psychiatric entities, disorders and difficulties which we connect attribute to the dysfunction of the psychological apparatus, it is necessary to differentiate relatively unmistakable states, such as depression, phobia, anxiety, alcoholism, insomnia and delirium, from obsession or even the frequently mentioned epilepsy and hysteria. Namely, medieval understanding of diseases often viewed disease etiologically through internal or external actions of evil powers, demonic possession.³ That is why “diagnostics”

as well as “therapy” were directed towards exorcising the devil, while the patron saints of mental illnesses were charismatic individuals who through their life (and death) showed strength in the fight with the devil. On the other hand, the lack of knowledge about today’s classification of mental illnesses often resulted in “diagnostic errors” and the omission of recognising serious states such as schizophrenia or dementia. In this sense the relative quantitative “lack” of patron saints of mental disorders compared to so-called somatic diseases is understandable (the kind that ethno-medicine recognises in a large number).^{1,16}

With mental disorders, the power of auto- and hetero-suggestion is particularly expressed. The effect on neuroplastic changes, and connected with this also possible healing, recognises spiritual psychiatry which uses practising spirituality with the objective of treatment of psychiatric illnesses.¹² Likewise, by studying spatial-time characteristics of the construction of shrines (hagiotopography and hagiochronology), it is possible to partially reconstruct the dynamics of public health issues, morbidity and mortality in individual local communities.^{1,9} In conclusion, the knowledge of ethno-medical traditions may also serve as a source of fight against stigmas, which are entailed by each psychiatric diagnosis, while encouraging spirituality and prayers to patron saints represents a specific and significant approach to those suffering from mental illnesses.

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