Traditional Representation of Medicine and Healing in the Christian Hierarchy

By HENRY SAYLES FRANCIS

IN THE early periods of Christian art, saints and their iconographical emblems were a part of the tradition of the Church, and in the long period of eight hundred years during which they appeared in art, there arose a complicated scheme of representation. In classical times, the average human was accustomed to seek solace and advice from the local oracle, or soothsayer, who, in turn, recommended the course to be followed and the particular god suited to the especial case of the individual or to the circumstances involved. Because folkways are at bottom the guiding rule in the behaviour of the common man, the Church in the early Christian eras, when it was gradually gaining ascendancy over the belated remains of the pagan religions, took over bodily into its ritual many of these old practices. The pagan gods, therefore, with their special attributes, were replaced by various saints and their symbols, and this historical accident provided the means by which the special functions of each god could be carried on.

The various sources of the Church symbolism are now, in most cases, obscure; as a rule, the Church in particularizing the functions of the members of its traditional hierarchy, followed the general pattern of classical legend rather than adhering rigidly to every point. In fact, it was not alone the Greek and Roman tradition which provided the model; it was also the Oriental cultures from which suggestive material was borrowed; and gradually the codices and written literature which were built up on the Christian background furnished the point of departure for the dogma which became in time the legend of the faith. This emergence of a Christian legend came about at an early date, relatively speaking, so that even in Byzantine times, in the third and fourth centuries, there was established a visual tradition for the sacred story which was accepted as both authoritative and basic. The artist or craftsman who interpreted sacred story had a well-defined path to follow, documented by the stories of both Old and New Testaments.

There is a considerable number of Christian personalities who have a relation to medicine in some specific capacity. Of these, however, only a few may be associated with the field in any general or comprehensive manner, or are more than obscurely represented. Perhaps the most

important are: Sts. Cosmas and Damian, St. Roch, St. Luke, St. Benedict, St. Lucy, St. Sebastian, and St. Agatha. The rest are, for the most part, inconspicuous, local, or definitely restricted to some special phase of medicine, and are interesting from our point of view solely from this particular relation rather than for any general role in medical art.

At an early date, the story of the saints, Cosmas and Damian, had an attraction which accounts for its appearance in religious representation. In an era when security of any kind was, at the best, slight, fear of disease and accident in its stark reality drove the average person to put his trust in the supernatural or in his religion, or in a combination of both. The story of Cosmas and Damian runs, briefly, as follows: Brothers, born of a religious mother in the city of Egea, in Arabia, "they were learned in the art of medicine and of leechcraft and received so great grace of God that they healed all maladies and languors, not only of men but also cured and healed beasts."[1] They devoted their lives to the sick without remuneration and fell, in due course of time, into the hands of malevolent people who were jealous of their knowledge; these latter tried various forms of torture upon them and finally martyred them. They tormented them in hands and feet; threw them into the sea from which they were rescued from drowning by angels; they cast them into fire which turned and slew many of the spectators; they imprisoned, crucified, stoned, and finally shot them with arrows, these missives returning to hurt the malefactors. These saints were beheaded ultimately, in 278 A.D., in the reign of the Emperor Diocletian.

In 516-30, in honor of these doctor-martyrs, Pope Felix IV founded in Rome a basilica known today as the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. Built in the Forum of Rome, to the east of the Temple of Faustina, it incorporated two antique buildings erected by the Emperor Maxentius in honor of his son Romulus. The excellent mosaics in the tribune, which date from the time of the church's erection, show the Saints Cosmas and Damian being conducted to Christ by Sts. Peter and Paul (Fig. 1). Although restored in the seventeenth century, they still preserve their original character and in form of representation—the monumental scale and concept, the ideal of total confrontality and simplicity—are pure Byzantine. The appearance of such a representation shortly after the origin of the legend is an indication of its popularity, and the continued concern with the story can be traced in treatments of the legend by various artists. Their numbers and variety attest the lively interest both in the subject and in the reality accorded to the legendary prowess of these Arabian converts.

Fra Angelico da Fiesole, the Florentine painter of the fifteenth century, used the theme in a number of works: a set of three predella panels in Munich; a "Martyrdom of the Saints," and the "Healing of a

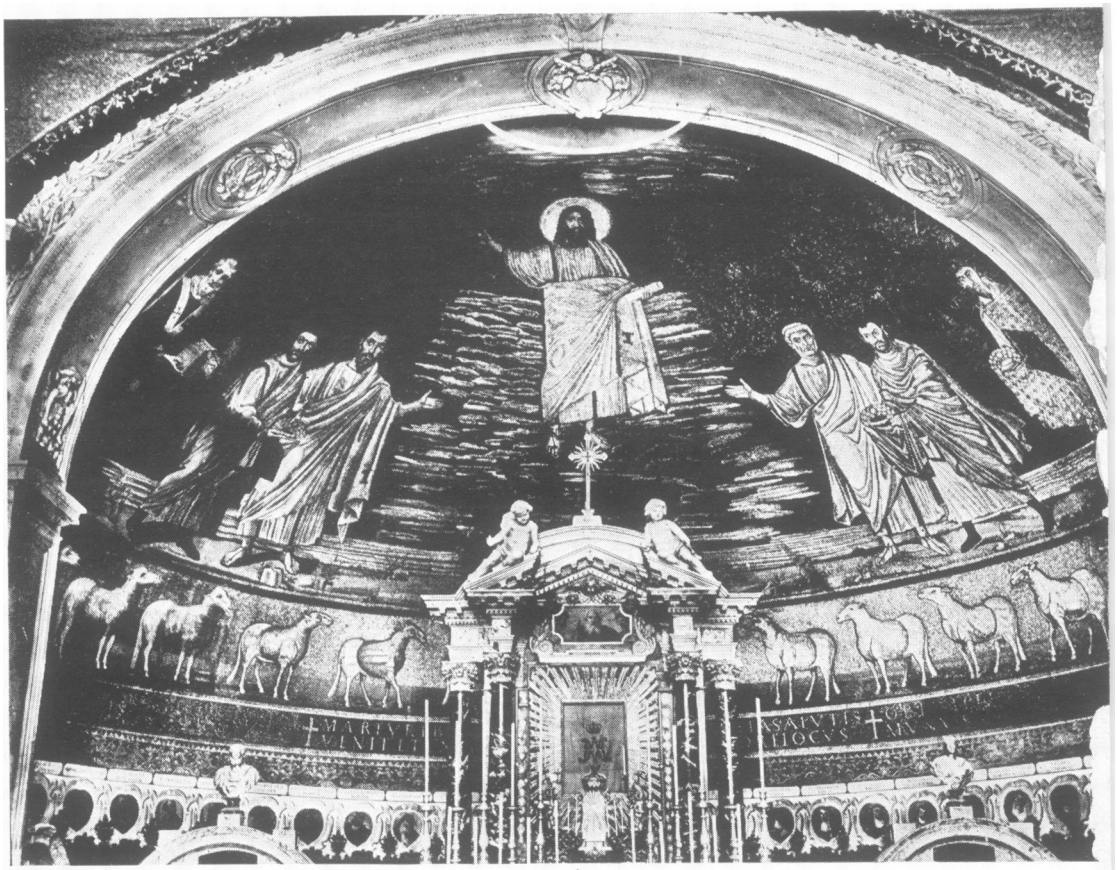

FIG. 1. Byzantine mosaic in the Tribune Sts. Cosmas and Damian, in Rome.

Cripple," and two other subjects, including the saints presented to the Virgin, in the Museum of the Convent of St. Mark in Florence; a "Martyrdom of the Saints," in the Dublin Gallery; a "Martyrdom" in the Louvre, Paris; and another panel of the "Miracle of the Saints," once in the Albert Keller Collection in New York. All, in their narrative style, are peculiarly characteristic of Fra Angelico's work, and the impassive quality of childlike simplicity which they possess somehow suits the telling of the tale admirably.

In sculpture these two saints were represented by the later Renaissance artists, Montorsoli and Raffaello di Montelupo, both followers and the latter an assistant of the great Michelangelo. In the North the legend must also have had widespread currency, for there is a panel by Roger van der Weyden, once in the Frankfurt Museum, which shows the saints. There is also an engraving by the German, Israhel van Meckenem, dated 1503, which was devoted to the subject.

The next saint whose representations were of importance in connection with the medical theme was St. Roch, born of noble parentage at Montpellier on the southern borders of France. Exhorted by a dying parent to practice, among other virtues, the care of the sick and needy, St. Roch gave up his heritage and devoted his life entirely to this mission. He went to Rome and, later, to Rimini and Piacenza in the north of Italy, where he not only cured cases of the pestilence, but suffered from it himself, and it is this disease with which he is most frequently associated. The characteristic representation of the saint, in fact, shows him standing holding up his cloak to reveal the sore of the plague on his leg, to which he points. In contrast to the saints just mentioned, Roch does not appear in the earlier period of representation; from the fifteenth century on many pictures of him were made, either alone or included among groups as a votive figure. Representing the saint, is a Carlo Crivelli, in the Wallace Collection in London; a Giovanni Bellini, in the Metropolitan Museum, New York; a Botticelli in the church of San Giovanni in Montelupo outside of Florence; a fragment of a fresco in the Jacobs Collection in Baltimore, in which Roch appears; and many others. However, one especially ranks as most convincing in portrayal of the saint and his life; namely, the great canvas painted for the Church of San Rocco in Venice by Tintoretto. This canvas, commissioned by the confraternity of doctors, is one of this artist's great feats of painting, and shows the episode of St. Roch in prison, healing those stricken with the plague. In this picture, the subject is conceived of in a truly realistic manner, all the gruesome and poignant features of the scene being emphasized in contradistinction to the treatment of the motive in the mosaics of the Byzantine period or by Fra Angelico, with his narrative style. In the Scuola di San Rocco, besides, in the chapter house of the confraternity adjacent to the church, is a series of pictures which belong with this canvas of St. Roch plague-stricken, a series dealing with the life of the saint: "St. Roch and the Beasts of the Field"; "St. Roch in Campo d'Armato"; "St. Roch Consoled by an Angel"; St. Roch before the Pope"; and "The Finding of the Body of St. Roch."

When it comes to a consideration of the well-known and well-represented saints, Luke, Benedict, and Sebastian, we find that as a rule they appear in other roles than those specifically connected with medicine. Luke, for instance, appears most commonly as the Evangelist, with the iconographical attribute of the winged, reclining bull, and secondly he appears in the role as the painter of the Virgin. On the other hand, one finds relatively few examples in the field of painting or any other medium, of St. Luke in his capacity as a physician, although as Caxton says in *The Golden Legend,* "Luke was of the nation of Syria, and Antiochian by art of medicine . . .";[2] he was furthermore the patron saint of the doctors. One illustration of him in this capacity is to be

found in the University of Basel in a manuscript, dated 1484, in which the saint is shown with a urinal as well as the symbol of the Evangelist (Fig. 2); he also holds a pen, which may indicate his activities as a writer or as a painter, but the intention was clearly to stress his role as the patron saint of medicine.[3]

St. Sebastian, born at Narbonne, France, was later educated at Milan. He was beloved and honored by the Emperor Diocletian, who placed trust and confidence in him until he discovered that Sebastian was a Christian, whereupon he ordered him shot to death with arrows, and when he did not die, had him stoned to death and buried him in a pit from which his body was rescued by none other than St. Lucy, to whom he had appeared in a vision and by whom he was subsequently buried in the catacombs beside the martyrs. St. Sebastian is usually depicted as half-clothed, pierced by arrows, and bound to a column. The arrows are supposed to represent the outbreak of disease, and in this oblique way St. Sebastian becomes a medical saint allied to the pestilence. Because he is one of the most frequently represented of all the saints in art, it is not hard to find examples illustrating the events of his life, especially his martyrdom. His story is used first in the early manuscripts, and again more frequently in the art of the early Renaissance. There are several versions of the tale illustrated by fine paintings of Mantegna, in the Ca d'Oro, Venice, in the Louvre, Paris, and again in Vienna; and all are done in the classical vein of that great early Renaissance painter. Then, there are several other examples of the same theme by Giovanni Bellini, notably the shutters to a sculptured shrine in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, in which St. Sebastian appears with St. Jerome and two other saints, Roch and Louis, both of whom are pertinent to our subject. Pictures of St. Sebastian were also done by Perugino, notably one in Perugia.

St. Benedict, the founder in the ninth century of the Abbey of Montecassino, established at this early date a hospital where monastic medicine flourished. "If not an actual medical school, Montecassino was an important center of scholarship in which medicine had an important part."[4] From this monastery, the practice of the medical arts became associated with the monastic existence and was carried on elsewhere by the Benedictines, hospitals being established all over Europe. A Benedictine Abbot, Desiderius, later Pope Victor III, wrote books on the *Medical Miracles of St. Benedict.* The sick came to the noted hospice of Montecassino from all parts of Europe to be cured, and St. Benedict himself is recorded as having cured the Emperor Henry II of Bavaria, by performing an operation for lithotomy, as a bas-relief in Bamberg Cathedral confirms. The fame of St. Benedict justly rated the narrative series of frescoes which were painted in the sacristy of the Church of St. Miniato, near Florence, by Spinello Aretino, a follower of Giotto,

FIG. 2. St. Luke, a patron saint of physicians, mitigates the sufferings of the dying. From a matriculation volume in the university library of Basel. 1484.

FIG. 3. St. Benedict exorcizing a possessed Monk. School of Lazio, first quarter of the 15th century. Sacro Speco, Subiaco.

and by the Marchigian, Lazio. Among the episodes there represented dealing with the Saint's achievements as a physician, is one in which he is performing the cure for insanity (Fig. 3).

Apart from the saints just discussed, there were many figures who were associated in one way or another with illness, disability, or healing, and who, as time passed, came to be identified with the various experiences in which they took part. Before listing the saints with the pictorial scenes related to them, there should be a consideration of the traditional legends of healing which were derived from the Vulgate, especially from the Gospels of the New Testament. The miracles of Christ are the most widely represented subjects from this source, but there appear, as well, mystical healings performed by the Apostles as a result of the

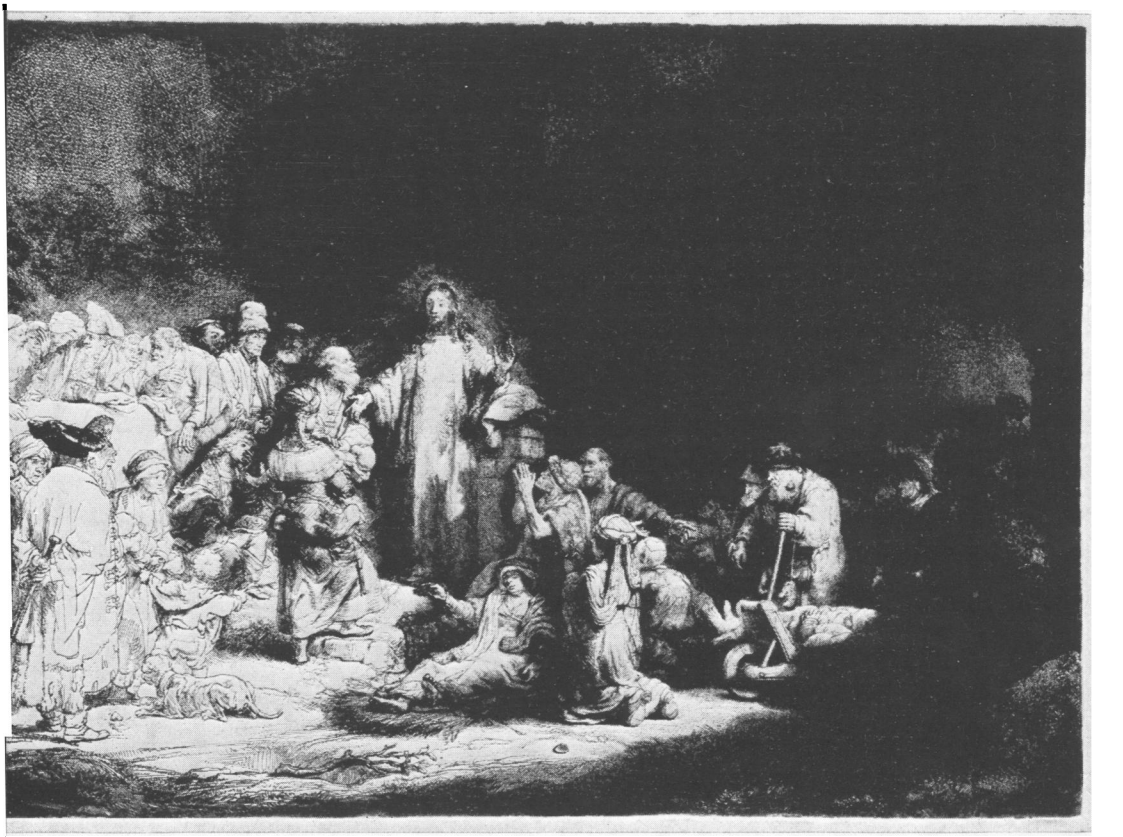

FIG. 4. Christ healing the sick at the gates of the temple, by Rembrandt.

admonition of Christ to them: "And He called unto Him His twelve disciples, and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of disease and all manner of sickness" (Matthew X. 1.). As has been mentioned, St. Luke is known to have been trained especially as a physician in Antioch, yet as an Evangelist he also possessed mystical power to heal. The Apostles, Peter and John, obviously because of their lowly walk in life, were not so trained. Nevertheless, they also were endowed with mystical powers of curing. The legend which was built up around these healings was confused; no distinction being made between cures by mystical and natural means. The artists, following the general tradition, did not discriminate between the two, either. For example, the "Peter and John Healing the Sick" by Joachim Bueckelaer in the Hermitage in Leningrad, although a relatively obscure sample as compared with a work of a great master, illustrates the point. Much more important from the artistic standpoint are certain illustrations which definitely portray miraculous cures. "Christ Healing the Sick at the Gates of the Temple" (Fig. 4), which as a universally

accepted instance of divine healing was interpreted by Rembrandt in his famous etching called the "Hundred Guilder Print," is one of the most notable renderings of a religious theme in the whole roster of biblical pictures. A further example is the detail, Christ and the Leper, by Cosimo Rosselli from the Christ Preaching in one of the series of frescoes done in 1482 on the walls of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. Others, still, are the painting in the Hermitage, Leningrad, by the sixteenth-century Dutch painter, Lucas van Leyden, "Christ Healing the Blind at Jericho"; and the series of twelfth-century mosaics in the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, showing Christ with the Woman with Dropsy, Christ with the Ten Lepers, and Christ with the Blind at Jericho.

The most frequently depicted theme was the Raising of Lazarus, the popularity of which must be accepted as an expression of the general belief of the time in the mystical healing and restorative powers claimed throughout the Church. Whether painted by the fifteenth-century Sienese, Barna Senese, by the sixteenth-century Tintoretto, by Lastman, the master of Rembrandt in the seventeenth century, or by the Genoese, Magnasco, in the eighteenth, the scene was conceived by all as especially outstanding. St. Agnes performed a like miracle upon the stricken son of Aspasius, an event which is illustrated in the Tintoretto canvas in S. Maria dell 'Orto in Venice; in truth, however, this incident may be placed more in the category of prayer and conversion than in that of healing as such. St. Benedict, who was like St. Luke, the founder of a hospital, also appears in the legendary role as a performer of miracles, with the supernatural powers conferred upon countless other saints, such as Paul and Mark, as is visible in Tintoretto's picture, "The Miracle of St. Mark," the rescuing of a slave from Death and Torture. St. Anthony of Padua was also one of the better known of the hierarchy who exorcised devils. There is an altarpiece by Mezzasti showing this, and the curing of the boy's amputated leg, at San Francesco, Montefalco.

It would appear to be off the subject of medicine in art to allude to such miracles, even though they appear so frequently in the religious painting of the Pre-Renaissance, but for the fact that in Post-Renaissance art a new emphasis was placed on the same theme. The end of the sixteenth century saw the revivification of the Roman Catholic Church in its reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the latter beginning arbitrarily with the publication of Luther's Articles in 1517. This Counter-Reformation came in the form of renewed piety and austerity within the Church, and with this regeneration there appeared a new departure in the procedure of the faith, namely the Society of Jesus, founded by St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis Xavier. One of the chief precepts of this Society, which was a teaching and ministering order, was to care for the sick, an injunction which served as an active force in propa-

FIG. 5. The miracle of St. Ignatius de Loyola, by Peter Paul Rubens. (1620) Vienna.

gating the faith. In this treatment of illness, the element of ecstasy, almost of religious auto-intoxication, so genuine a form of uplifting, continued to be present, and hence it appears again in the realm of art in such far from trivial examples as Rubens' Loyola altar in Vienna, "St. Ignatius Loyola Casting Out Demons," painted in 1620 (Fig. 5).

The great seventeenth-century French artist, Nicolas Poussin, also painted a "Miracle of Healing," in which was a portrait of St. Francis Xavier, the co-author of the movement. Rubens also painted a similar altarpiece of St. Francis Xavier, in Vienna, too. In later works, the canonized cardinal, St. Carlo Borromeo, of Venice, was repeatedly used by the artists in the role of healing, Orazio Borgiani's "St. Carlo Borromeo Curing the Plague-Stricken" in the Church of St. Adriano, in Rome, being an example. Mystic healing had its accepted place in the legends of the Christian religion, and the phenomenon was recorded an infinite number of times during the ten centuries following. If it is important to consider this early phase, it is of equal value to give attention to the later appearance of the same manifestation, since it appears up to the present day not only in the Roman Catholic Church at such shrines as Lourdes and St. Anne de Beaupré where the element of faith was permanent but has its counterpart in the mental healing of Christian Science, and in the fields of psychiatry and psychology.

Elsewhere in these pages, Dr. Dittrick discusses, from the more technical medical viewpoint, various saints and the diseases with which they are specifically associated. An exhaustive list in which the specific disease was assigned to each saint would be overlong and, in many cases, conjectural. Much unrelated data may be found in Caxton's *Golden Legend,* or Drake's *Saints and Their Emblems,*[5] and the list which follows is, to a large extent, drawn from these sources. This list, not inclusive and somewhat at random, gives the saints most commonly found in Pre-Renaissance and Renaissance painting and mentions some of those definitely associated with diseases, which have no specific illustration.

SAINTS

St. Adela (Alsace)	Diseases of the eye	
St. Adrian	The Plague	
St. Agatha	Breasts—symbol of martyrdom Leprosy also	Sebastiano del Piombo, Pitti Gallery, Florence, #179
St. Angradrisma of Beauvais	Smallpox—scars on her face	
St. Anna	The Plague	Nikolaus Manuel Deutsch, Basel Gallery
St. Anthony of Padua	Exorcized devils—insanity. Miraculously healed an amputated leg.	Donatello relief, High Altar, S. Antonio, Padua
St. Anthony the Hermit	Ergotism	Velasquez, Prado, Madrid
St. Apollonia	Teeth	Carlo Dolci, Corsini Gallery, Rome
St. Augustine	Plague	Tintoretto, Vicenza Gallery, #74
St. Blasius[6]	Eye diseases, also diseases of the neck and throat; extracts a thorn from a child's throat.	Titian, Ancona Gallery, #14

St. Catherine of Alexandria	Diseases of the tongue, also science.	
St. Carlo Borromeo	Osteomyelitis	Simon Vouet; Coll. W. A. Freund, Berlin
St. Claire	Diseases of the eyes (in France)	Church S. Maclou, Rouen
St. Cluintinus	Cure of Swollen Legs	
St. Conrad of Constance	Restoring a lunatic	
St. Cornelius	Epilepsy	
St. Cyriacus	Mental diseases	Grünewald, Stadtgeschichtliches Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main
St. Dionysius	Invocation against the "French Malady"—syphilis	Anonymous XV c. German woodcut. Nurmberg, c. 1496
St. Domitian	Fever	
St. Dymphna	Insanity	Altarpiece at Gheel (The saint surrounded by lunatics)
St. Eligius		Monument on the Or San Michele, Florence
St. Elizabeth of Hungary	Leprosy	Holbein, Munich
St. Erasmus	Colic and abdominal pains. (His bowels wound on a windlass)	Magnasco, Collection Viganò, Milan
St. Fara	Sore Eyes	
St. Gebhard	Healing a Cripple	
St. Genevieve	Restoration of Sight	
St. Giles	Cripples; also Lepers	
St. Gregory the Great	Stays plague at Castel San Angelo, Rome	Giovanni di Paolo, Paris, Louvre, #1659-A
St. Gummar	Hernia	
St. Job	Leprosy	
St. Jerome	Extracts thorn from Lion's Paw	Naples, Colantonio del Fiore
St. Leonardus	Sterility; also patron saint of animals and prisoners	
St. Leven	Deformed Children	
St. Louis	Little Girl saved from Drowning	Manuscript page XVth C. "Life and Miracles of St. Louis," B. N., French, #2829
St. Lucy	Eyes	Florence, Domenico Veneziano
St. Margherita of Cortona	Prosperous delivery	Nicolo Pisano, Sarcophagus, Cortona
St. Mary Magdelen	Penitent Women	Lucas van Leyden
St. Martin of Tours	Leprosy; also penitent drunkards	Basel: Basel School c. 1450
St. Othilia	Diseases of the eyes	Gothic Altarwing, St. Peters, Salzburg
St. Panteleon	As Luke, Patron of Doctors, Decapitated, hence headaches	Veronese, St. Pantaleone, Venice
St. Sebalus	Restoration of sight Curing a blind man	
St. Ursula	Breasts	Memling
St. Vitus	St. Vitus dance	
St. Zeno	Exorcizing a possessed woman	Liberale da Verona
St. Zenobius	Raising a Child	Benozzo Gozzoli, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, #G742-1, Miracle of Zenobius

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2. CAXTON, WILLIAM. Ibid. Vol. VI, p. 47 "Of St. Luke Evangelist."
3. See Ciba Symposia . . . July, 1939, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 102.
4. CASTIGLIONI, ARTURO: *A History of Medicine* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1941), p. 294.
5. DRAKE, MAURICE & WILFRED: *Saints and Their Emblems* (T. Werner Laurie Ltd., London, 1916).
6. In the Medieval Collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art is the Horn of St. Blasius, an attribute which often distinguishes the Saint in pictorial representation.

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