SAINTS AND SUFFERING- VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

Introduction- Read the introduction

'Saint' is a Christian term that describes a person who has led an extraordinarily virtuous life, perhaps overcoming personal hardships and suffering, and who, as a result, has become closer to God. In the medieval period, saints were thought to hold a particularly high position in Heaven, and because of this they were seen as intercessors. It was believed that they could add their support to human prayers and could distribute God’s gifts to mankind. As such they played an important role in medieval Christian belief.

Saints, particularly female saints, were also venerated because of the pain or martyrdom they suffered during their lives. For people living in an age where what rudimentary medicine there was was as likely to kill as to cure you, saints, who had suffered themselves, were comforting figures and a focus for prayers for recovery.

Certain saints were associated with certain ailments, and became known as patron saints (specialist intercessors) for people suffering from those ailments. Saint Roch, for example, who suffered from the plague, became the patron saint of lepers and plague victims. Traditionally St Roch is said to have been born in Montpellier, France, in about 1295 and devoted his life to tending to the poor and the sick. At Piacenza, Italy, he himself contracted the plague and was expelled into the woods. There, ill and starving, he was saved when a hunting dog belonging to a local nobleman found him and brought him bread and healed his wounds by licking them.

You can listen to an audio description of the painted wooden statue of Saint Roch by clicking on the audio bar below. If you then click on the main image you can view a large version of the statue while listening to the description.

**AUDIO DESCRIPTION**- Analyse this audio description:



**Transcript repeated from main page**

**Female Narrator:**

The naturalistically painted and gilded wooden statue represents St Roch and his devoted companion, a smallish dog. The statue is slightly less than one and a half metres, or nearly 5 feet tall and was made around 1540-50, probably in the Rioja region of northern Spain.

St Roch stands upright, holding a long, thin pilgrim staff in his left hand. His dark brown hair is short and wavy and he's bearded. A gilded bandana is knotted tightly around his brow. His gaze is directed towards the ground. He grips the handle of a small clapper in his right hand and is about to shake it to warn others of his approach, as he's infected with the plague.

His gilded cloak is fastened at the shoulders and hangs in deep folds. What now appears to be the black lining is in fact tarnished silver. A black pilgrim's pouch is slung over his shoulder. The smock beneath the cloak is also gilded, with an edging of blue decorated with a pattern of stylised gold flowers. The smock has parted, revealing a thigh-length white garment. A tear in the white cloth reveals horrible plague sores on St Roch's right thigh.

His long bare legs are also covered with sores. A dirty white bandage is wrapped around his left shin. He wears a pair of open sandals and treads on a rock-like, wooden plinth. This also supports his companion, an emaciated white dog with brown patches. The seated dog stretches to lick a festering sore on St Roch's calf. At the time the statue was made, a dog's saliva was thought to have antiseptic properties.

Roch was born in the south of France in about 1350. According to legend, while on a pilgrimage through Italy, he caught the plague and retreated to remote woodland to live alone. A dog became his constant companion and regularly brought him food. St Roch was cured after praying to God, and then he himself miraculously cured other plague victims. During his lifetime the plague devastated Europe: as much as a third of the continent's population died between 1348 and 1350 alone. The plague returned at regular intervals and people would pray to St Roch for deliverance from the death and suffering that it brought.

In this statue, the saint's face is a picture of health though the sores on his legs suggest otherwise. This is to suggest his blessed state. The statue may originally have been placed in a niche in a church in La Rioja, or it might have formed part of an altarpiece. In either case the worshippers would have knelt in front of the figure as they offered their prayers.

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**Male Narrator:**  
Saints still play an important role in the spiritual lives of many people today.  
Father James Hanvey - theologian, teacher, and a member of London's Jesuit Community - discusses the role of faith in helping people cope with pain and suffering.

**James Hanvey:**God doesn't protect us against the frailty of being human … but from a Christian point of view, there is a real legitimacy, first of all in praying for healing, that God would intervene, that God would be present, but only if it's for God's glory, and so in a sense, even in our illness, we're asking that it can be used for God's purpose. If it is God's will, we come to understand that the illness that we have or the illness that someone else carries is not going to be miraculously cured, then we're called I think to a very deep inner journey, and that's a profound journey of faith in which we find that God is not absent on that journey but draws us into a deeper mystery of suffering itself and how that suffering, even as its bleakest, through faith, can be used as part of God's whole redemptive purpose.

YOU CAN DOWNLOAD THE AUDIO FILE:

<http://media.vam.ac.uk/audio/a-statue-of-st-roch.mp3>

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