INTRODUCTION

“O excellent St. Rita, worker of miracles, from thy sanctuary in Cassia, wherein all thy beauty thou sleepest in peace, where thy relics exhale breaths of paradise, turn thy merciful eyes on me who suffer and weep!”

- Oration To The Saint of The Impossible

Roman Catholic tradition has made Saints the protectors of various aspects of life. The practice of adopting patron Saints originates in the founding of the first public Churches in the Roman Empire, most of which were erected over the graves of martyrs. The Churches were named after the martyr, and the martyr was believed to act as an intercessor for those who worshiped at the respective site. Later, the practice spread beyond Churches to the ordinary interests of life, such as health, family, trade, maladies, cities, and countries. Saints were chosen as patrons of occupations that they had actually held or had patronized during their lives. Hence, St. Joseph became the patron Saint of carpenters, St. Cecilia of musicians, etc. The same is true of patron Saints for diseases, who either suffered from the illness assigned to them or cared for those who did. Sometimes though, martyrs were chosen as the patron Saints of diseases which were reminiscent
of their martyrdom. Thus, St. Laurence is invoked for burns because he was put to death by being roasted on a gridiron, and St. Bartholomew is invoked for skin diseases since images of his martyrdom depict him with his skin draped over his arm. St. Agatha was chosen as the patron of women with breast cancer, since her breasts were cut off when she refused marriage to a non-Christian. Finally, St. Agnes of Rome has been proposed as protector Saint for women with hair loss and patron Saint for trichologists on the basis of the miraculous growth of long hair to cover her body when she was stripped naked in her martyrdom, her feast day when seasonal hair growth is peaking at its maximum, and her attribute in Christian iconography, the lamb, with the Australian Hair and Wool Research Society being one of the original major international, not-for-profit organizations to bring together premier doctors and scientists involved in the treatment and research of hair disorders.

Christian hagiography deals with the account of the Saints’ lives and passion, and Christian iconography with the Saints’ depiction in religious art. Catholic churches are full of images of Saints, in stained glass windows, sculptures, murals, and mosaics. Appreciation of religious art is deepened by knowledge of what is depicted, and that includes all the mysterious figures carrying various objects and dressed in different ways. Saints are only sometimes labeled with their names. The clues to their identity are rather given in their appearance or in what they are holding. These objects may be the instruments of martyrdom, representations of events in their lives, or symbols of their teachings, and are called the Saint’s attributes.

Table 1 gives a summary of Saints with peculiarities and symbolism related to their hair.[4]

### SAINT RITA OF CASCIA

St. Rita of Cascia (1381–1457) is a Saint venerated in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in Italy. She was an Italian widow and Augustinian nun. She was married at the age of 12 as a child bride; her marriage lasted for 18 years, during which she is evoked for her Christian values as a model wife and mother who made efforts to convert her husband from his abusive behavior. On the murder of her husband by a feuding family, she sought to persuade her sons from retaliating but to no avail. Ultimately, she petitioned God to take her sons rather than yield them to mortal sin and Hell. Her sons eventually died of dysentery, which reverent Catholics believe was God’s reply to her prayers, taking her sons by natural death. Rita subsequently joined an Augustinian community of religious sisters, where she was acknowledged for the efficacy of her prayers. At the age of approximately 60 years, a small bleeding wound appeared on her forehead while she was meditating before an image of Christ crucified, as though a thorn from the crown that encircled Christ’s head had penetrated her own flesh. For the next 15 years, she bore the forehead wound which is understood to indicate partial religious

### Table 1: Summary of saints, peculiarities, and symbolism of their hair[4]

| Saint              | Period            | Sanctity     | Account                     | Attribute                                      | Patronage                                      | Hair condition                      | Symbolism                        |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Mary Magdalene     | 1st century       | Follower of Christ and the Apostles | New testament (Luke) | Long, uncovered hair, ointment vase<br> In the arena, usually together with Felicity | Hairstylists<br> Martyrs | Long and beautiful hair<br> Hair in martyrdom | Female erotic attractivity<br> Dignity |
| Perpetua           | Died 203          | Martyr       | Tertullian of Carthage      | Lamb                                          | Girls, betrothed women, virgins, rape victims, gardeners | Long hair | Chastity |
| Agnes of Rome      | 291-304           | Martyr       | Jacobus de Voragine         | Beautiful hair                                 |                                                |                                    |                                  |
| Margaret of Antiocha | Died 305        | Martyr       | Jacobus de Voragine         | Dragon, cross                                  | Childbirth                                     | Hair as martyrdom                  | Martyrdom                       |
| Onuphrius the Great | 320-400           | Hermit       | Paphnutius                  | Wildman completely covered with hair, loin girdle of leaves | Weavers                                       | Generalized hypertrichosis         | Withdrawal from worldly concerns and vanities |
| Mary of Egypt      | 344-421           | Hermit       | Sophronius                  | Long hair covering the naked body              | Penitents                                      | Long and disheveled hair           | Withdrawal from worldly concerns and vanities |
| Wilgefortis        | Unknown, cult aroused in the 14th century | Martyr       | Popular religious imagination | Beard, crucifixion | Difficult marriages | Facial hirsutism | Resistance |
| Thomas More        | 1478-1535         | Martyr       | History of England          | Book, axe                                      | Statesmen and politicians | Sudden whitening of hair | Extreme psychological stress |
stigmatization and external sign of mystical union with Christ.

Rita was beatified by Pope Urban VIII in 1626 and canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1900. Her feast day is celebrated on May 22. At her canonization ceremony, she was bestowed the title of Patroness for impossible causes, whereas in many Catholic countries, Rita came to be known to be the Patroness of broken hearts, specifically for sterility, abuse victims, loneliness, marriage difficulties, parenthood, widows, and bodily ills. Various miracles are attributed to her intercession.

In Christian iconography, St. Rita is depicted with a forehead wound [Figure 1] and sometimes holding a thorn.

FRONTAL FIBROSING ALOPECIA: THE CONNECTION

Frontal fibrosing alopecia represents a peculiar condition predominantly but not exclusively affecting women in the postmenopause. Originally reported by Kossard,[5] the condition presents with progressive marginal alopecia along the frontal and temporal hairline. Since the original description in 1994, the number of cases has exploded exponentially worldwide, while its etiology remains obscure.

In the case of St. Rita of Cascia, specifically her depiction in Christian iconography, the frontal wound is representative of the thorn the disease represents for women affected with frontal fibrosing alopecia, and at the same time of its effective treatment with intralesional triamcinolone injections along the frontal hairline,[6‑8] reminiscent of the forehead wounds caused by the crown of thorns.

Figure 1: St. Rita of Cascia. The depiction of the forehead wound. 18th-century wooden figurine from Brazil. Purchased at a São Paulo open-air antiques market

WHY A PATRON SAINT?

Few practices of the Catholic Church have been so misunderstood as devotion to patron Saints. From the earliest days of the Church, the faithful have chosen a particularly holy person who has passed on to intercede for them with God. Seeking the intercession of a patron Saint does not mean that one cannot approach God directly in prayer. Rather, some consider it an act of special devotion toward God to display humility in asking a Saint for intercession rather than expecting to be answered directly.

The doctrine of Saintly intercession reaches back to the earliest Church, and points to Scriptural passages as: Tobit 13:12–15, Revelation 5:8, and Revelation 8:3–4, which depict heavenly beings offering the prayers of mortals before God, and James 5:16, where all those in heaven can be presumed to be living righteously, which states the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. The justification for calling on a Saint in prayer is that the Saints are close to God because of their holiness and accessible to humans. Historically, the belief matched the earthly patterns of patron-client relations that were the standard way of attempting to deal with the bureaucracy of the Roman Empire. The Saints were seen as God’s courtiers in a Heaven that was often imagined as resembling somewhat the courts of earthly rulers. In fact, it is the communion of Saints in actual practice.[9]

Saints help to find community and to break out of the isolation, anonymity, and dumbness of the modern society. The communion of Saints is the spiritual union of all Christians living and the dead, those on earth, in heaven and in Catholic belief, in purgatory. They share a single mystical body, with Christ as the head, in which each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all. The patron Saints help to believe in the possibility of miracles and miraculous healings. Ultimately, the exemplary lives of the Saints show us how salvation can be the positive effect of suffering.[10]

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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