Saint Roch and Social Distancing During Pandemics: Lessons to be Remembered

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Abstract

Surprisingly, Catholic hagiography can teach us a lot about medicine. As an example, we present here the history of Saint Roch who is considered, along with Saint Sebastian, one of the two main Saints who act as protectors against plagues and have often been invoked by Catholic people during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas Saint Sebastian is associated with plagues only symbolically, Catholic tradition considers Saint Roch to have had real contact with the bubonic plague. Indeed, during his pilgrimage to Rome, Saint Roch helped people suffering from the plague and was, subsequently, himself infected. He was then forced to retire in solitary confinement to avoid the plague's spread and followed scrupulously the necessary restrictive measures. Saint Roch's story provides useful lessons about the importance of social responsibility by respecting the restrictive rules during difficult times such as the COVID-19 epidemic.

Keywords Social distancing · Catholic hagiography · Epidemics

Introduction

COVID-19 is, by far, the greatest pandemic experienced by the modern globalised world. The entire world has faced a novel microbe for which there wasn't, initially, any known drug therapy or vaccine.

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Many governments imposed a series of non-pharmaceutical public health interventions to contain the virus's spread in order to avoid the complete collapse of the healthcare system (Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020). These old but still effective public health measures included isolation of infected people; quarantine of people presumably exposed to the disease; use of face masks; encouragement of hand hygiene; and, mainly, social distancing to reduce interactions within a community, which could possibly include as yet undiagnosed but infected individuals (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020).

These measures have been introduced in varying degrees and ways across different countries: total lockdown, travel restrictions, closure of schools and public offices and public spaces, etcetera.

Social distancing and restrictive measures have had a major impact on people's lives, sometimes making it difficult for them to follow these guidelines. It must be noted that failure to apply social distancing can create a serious problem and possibly increase the virus's spread. The relative results and the sustainability of these restrictive measures, however, depend on political systems and on socioeconomic and cultural aspects.

Catholic Hagiography and Plague

While doctors and healthcare workers navigated uncharted waters in their efforts to save lives of patients, religiously observant people following the Catholic tradition invoked various Saints for aid and protection against the epidemic. Here, we present, as an example, how the hagiography of a Saint may provide real-world lessons useful in combatting the actual pandemic. It is interesting to note that many Saints, mainly during the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods, were invoked against plagues and other epidemics but not all of the invoked saints received the honorary title of plague patron. In the Catholic tradition, Saint Sebastian and Saint Roch are the two principal Saints who are considered protectors against the bubonic plague (Attwater, 1994)—the epidemic pattern of which has been compared to that of COVID-19.

Saint Sebastian

Sebastian (ca. 256–288) was one of the first Christian saints and martyrs, venerated both in the Catholic and Orthodox Church. According to Catholic beliefs (Voragine, 1483a, b, vol. 2, pp. 104–109), Sebastian was born in Gallia Narbonensis (French province of Languedoc) before he went to Rome in 283 and began his military career under the emperor Carinus. It is believed that due to his valour, he soon became captain of the Praetorian Guards under the emperor Diocletian. However, owing to his subsequent conversion to Christianity, he was persecuted and sentenced to death by the emperor Diocletian. It is commonly believed that he was riddled with arrows but survived miraculously, and the Catholic widow Irene (Saint Irene of Rome) nursed

him back to health. Later, Sebastian presented himself before Diocletian and he was again condemned to death by beating. Now, his relics are believed to be in the Basilica of San Sebastiano (Rome, Italy).

Saint Sebastian is a patron saint of archers and athletes, and of those who desire a saintly death. He was also venerated as a protector from the bubonic plague and as a patron of plague victims. Sebastian's martyrdom was one of the favourite subjects of depiction by Renaissance artists, and it was painted by famous painters (such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, Andrea Mantegna), and this contributed to the rise in the spread of the cult of Saint Sebastian. Since the time of Western classical mythology, arrows have always symbolised the divine punishment for various transgressions. During the Middle Ages, epidemics were often considered divine punishments, and the wounds of Saint Sebastian are symbolically viewed as the buboes of the plague (Gelpi, 1998).

Saint Roch

Whereas Saint Sebastian is associated with plagues symbolically, it is believed that Saint Roch had actual contact with the bubonic plague. According to the Golden Legend ("Legenda aurea" or "Legenda sanctorum") (Voragine, 1483a, b, Vol. 5, pp. 3–8), Roch (ca. 1348–1376/1379), also known as Rock, was born in Montpellier (France). He was born into French nobility and both his parents were already believed to be devoted to Christ. They had trouble conceiving children and often prayed and took a vow of religious pilgrimage. According to Catholic religious legends, one day, an angel appeared to a woman known as Libera and she conceived a son, who in his baptism was called Roch and had a cross imprinted on his shoulder on the left side, which was a sign of being accepted and loved by God.

It is also commonly believed that before his death, his father commanded Roch to accomplish four things: continue to serve God; remember poor people, widows, and orphans; spend all his wealth in charitable deeds; and frequent the hospitals of the sick and the poor.

After his parents' death and upon completion of his father's commandments, Roch decreed to leave Montpellier and undertake pilgrimages. While, of course, there is no proof, it is believed that he put on the garment of a pilgrim and covered his head with a cap, a backpack on his shoulder and a pilgrim's staff in his right hand. After travelling via the desert, he arrived in Rome.

Saint Roch and Social Responsibility

At the time of Roch's arrival, a plague was fast spreading in Italy. Though there exists no historical proof, Catholic legends state that Roch stopped in Acquapendente (a little town situated about 150 km from Rome), where he willingly entered the hospitals of that town, helped the sick, and miraculously cured some people of the plague by prayer and the sign of the cross. He then visited Cesena and Rome and

it is commonly believed by religious tradition that the bubonic plague disappeared there by his miraculous powers.

Local tradition and mythology state that during his stay in Rome, Roch met a cardinal, who, according to Catholic beliefs, was saved from the pestilence after he impressed a cross on cardinal's forehead. Afterwards, the cardinal brought Roch to the Pope, who conceded to him the full remission of his sins. Roch stayed in Rome with the cardinal for three years and continued visiting and helping the poor plague victims.

After the cardinal's death, Roch left Rome and stopped in the city of Piacenza to assist with patient care in the local hospital. Though it is, of course, difficult to verify, nevertheless local tradition continues to recall and celebrate that once, after he had helped almost all the sick people of Piacenza, at about midnight, he heard in his sleep an angel thus saying: *'O Roch, most devout to Christ, awake and know that thou art smitten with the pestilence, study now how thou mayst be cured'*. Roch was in so much pain that the other patients couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. So, he went to the furthest corner in the hospital and lay down there.

Saint Roch and Social Isolation

The day after, the people forced Roch to leave the hospital and the city because they feared being infected by him. Then, Roch, oppressed by the fervent pain of the pestilence, allowed himself to be patiently chased away from Piacenza. According to Catholic myths and tradition, he is then believed to have taken refuge into the woods outside the city, avoiding any contact with other people. He sought relief from the pestilence by a well and its freshwater. It is believed that he was cured owing to the aid of a dog that supplied him with bread and licked his wounds.

There was, near the woods, a small village where a nobleman named Gothard lived. This nobleman kept many hunting dogs, one of whom would courageously take bread from the table and bring it to Roch. One day, following the dog, Gothard reached Roch's refuge. When Gothard approached the holy man, Roch, lest the contagious air of the pestilence might infect him, is believed to have said to him: friend, go away from me in good peace, for the most violent pestilence holdeth me. According to local religious tales, Gothard returned home and said to himself: 'this poor man whom I have left in the woods and desert, certainly is the man of God, sith this hound without reason bringeth to him bread. I, therefore, that have seen him do it, sought sooner to do it, if am a Christian man'. So, Gothard came back to the woods and became Roch's acolyte.

Later, Gothard left all his possessions and started wandering around Piacenza, where he was well known, begging for alms. Many of his acquaintances denied him alms, who—according to Catholic legends—subsequently fell ill with pestilence. In a short period, the city of Piacenza was infected by a contagious plague, and Gothard returned to the woods to inform Roch about it.

Though it is difficult to verify, nevertheless local tradition continues to recall and celebrate that Roch, moved by pity and mercy, despite being ill, went to Piacenza and he helped and healed the plagued patients by blessing them. He is also believed

to have treated the patients of the hospital of the same city. It is commonly upheld in the religious tradition that one day, after praying for his recovery, Roch was cured of the plague.

After his recovery, Rocco decided to go home and, on the way back, he stopped in a province of Lombardy called Angleria, where the lord of his province was at war with his enemy, whose knights mistook Roch as a spy. He was imprisoned for five years. At the end of the fifth year, Roch knew that his life was at its end. Then, he asked for a confession to a priest and remained in contemplation for three days. At the end of those three days, religious legends support—though, of course, there is no proof—that an angel sent by God appeared and Roch prayed that all the good Christian men who prayed with reverence in the name of Jesus be safely freed from the plague. At the end of this prayer, he died. According to local Catholic mythology and legends, an angel is believed to have brought into the prison a tablet upon which there was a divine inscription in gold letters, which he placed under the head of Roch. It is believed that on that tablet, it was inscribed that God had granted Roch's prayer, and so whoever calls upon St. Roch will not suffer from pestilence (Vorgine, 1483a, 1483b, Vol. 5, pp. 3–8).

His feast day is 16/17th August, and Saint Roch is considered the patron saint of dogs, invalids, falsely accused people, and bachelors. He was also venerated as the protector against pestilence. Indeed, Saint Roch's cult arose in Italy following the epidemic of the Black Death during the second half of the 15th century, and, afterwards, it expanded rapidly across the rest of Europe.

His emblem is the dog, and he is usually represented in paintings as a pilgrim suffering from plague (Fig. 1).

Saint Roch, Prudence, Justice, and Social Responsibility

The story of Saint Roch provides many lessons that are useful in a difficult time such as the one we are living through. Indeed, not only did he actively help during the plague's epidemic but also—and mainly—accepted without protest the necessity of quarantine when he himself was afflicted with the pestilence. Saint Roch didn't hesitate to self-isolate himself in the hospital, when he discovered that he was suffering from the pestilence. Afterwards, he accepted to live a difficult life isolated in the woods in order not to cause harm to others.

From a theological point of view, the life of Saint Roch is a great example of prudence, justice, and social responsibility. Though, there is limited actual proof, according to religious legends, Saint Roch is believed to have displayed his ability to govern and discipline himself by the use of reason (prudence). He also worked in the right way (justice), making decisions aimed at protecting and respecting society (social responsibility).

The story of St. Roch's life is an important and necessary reminder of social responsibility, which could play a key role in the present pandemic time. The importance of respecting the measures taken to counteract the epidemic's spread, such as

Fig. 1 Antonio Gandino. Polyptych of Saint Roch (1590). Collegiata dei Santi Nazario e Celso, Brescia, Italy (image in public domain on Wikipedia)

quarantine, isolation, and social distancing, plays a pivotal role in this battle against CoV-SARS2 and COVID-19.

Furthermore, the concept of social responsibility assumes an even more important role during the vaccination campaign against CoV-SARS2. Indeed, the

scepticism of many people and their anti-vaccination stance may pose a risk for the success of the ongoing vaccination campaign against SARS-CoV-2. Following in the tradition of St Roch, it is important that everyone assumes and adheres to their social responsibility and accept to be vaccinated thereby protecting themselves and others.

Conclusion

The story of the life of Saint Roch provides useful lessons to combat the current pandemic. It is a reminder of the importance of social responsibility in difficult and trying times. It is commonly upheld that Saint Roch not only actively helped during the plague's epidemic but taught us the importance of respecting measures aimed at counteracting an epidemic's spread. When he discovered that he was sick, he accepted the rule of social distancing, retreating to a cave or hut to avoid contact with others. In this way, saint Roch could perhaps be given the title: "Infectiologist of God".

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