

# TRAGIČNA SUDBINA SESTRE AGOSTINE PIETRANTONI - INSPIRACIJA K PROGLAŠENJU JOŠ JEDNE MOGUĆE ZAŠTITNICE MEDICINSKIH SESTARA

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## TRAGIC FATE OF THE SISTER OF CHARITY AGOSTINA PIETRANTONI - INSPIRATION FOR ANNOUNCE OF ONE MORE POSSIBLE PATRONESSE OF NURSES

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### SUMMARY

In the introductory part, the authors remind us of existence of two groups of Saint-Patrons, who are celebrated in the Christian tradition as saint-protectors against some diseases and protecting some professions, especially those that are connected with medical activities. In the second part, inspired by the tragic fate of the Sister of Charity, medical nun Agostina Pietrantonni (1864-1894), whose life was cruelly ended at the hands of a mentally disturbed patient. The authors here launch an initiative for her to be proclaimed a patroness-of all nurses, especially after she was beatified in 1972 and canonized in 1999.

**Key words:** History of medicine, 19th century, medical workers, neurology, psychiatry, religion

### INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the descriptive biography and the message delivered by the tragic death of Agostina Pietrantonni whose canonization was celebrated in 1999 and who was cruelly killed by a mentally disturbed patient, while she had been performing her medical duties.

Thinking of a great number of medical workers that are every day and night exposed to similar dangers and threats, the authors believe that by singling out and emphasizing just this one together with the

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hagiographic description of particulars connected with this Saint, it would be appropriate to initiate the procedure for her proclamation as the patroness of psychiatric and neurological workers. Especially so, because in the Christian tradition certain groups of people, including also medical workers, have their patrons or patronesses that are honoured by them and to whom they can apply for protection and help in desperation and necessity when they perform their medical duties.

### SAINT PATRONS IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Mercy, charity and pity as well as human solidarity and sympathetic feelings are doubtless some of the most important fundamental principles which the Christian faith and culture has given to the mankind. The significant innumerable examples that witness to this are the Christian martyrs, saints and the beatified who by their lives and martyrdom, their deaths and their faith became not only moral paragons but also spiritual inspirators, assistants and protectors. In the attempt to explain this phenomenon, one of the first answers would probably be the fact that just protection, beside the food, is one of the primordial human needs. If we first take a look at the Pre-Christian history, we shall see that, for example, in the Old Testament, Jehovah is celebrated as Patron-Protector, but the New Testament does not know any Patron or God's protection in the time of sufferings all the way up to the parusia, i.e. in traditional Christian belief, the return of Christ Jesus at the time on the Doomsday, the end of the World. However, the New Testament anticipates redemption and salvation from the eternal downfall and disaster[1].

The Christian Church in its religious orders and ranks and files, especially separates those that during their lives had come into prominence by their Christian virtues (faith, hope, love, justice, generosity, etc.) and who died "renowned for their being saints" and that as such were by the Church through the official procedure, i.e. by beatification (Lat. *beatificatio*) had been canonized. Those, among them, who had been distinguished by their extraordinary and rare virtues, and those that during their lives and after their deaths, had been miracle workers, after the rigorous procedures, were canonized as saints (Lat. *sanctus*, Gr. *hagios*). The first list of saints-martyrs and saints are kept



by the local Church from the early Christian era up to the 4th century when St. Jerome wrote the first official martyrology (Lat. *Martyrologium*). In 1586, the new RC Martyrology was published by unification of all data, which was to become the basis for oncoming hagiographic determinants. In this sense, for example, Bolandists had edited and rewritten the biographies of about 20,000 saints [2]. Among them, on this occasion, it is especially challenging to mention, the Pleiades of saints that are celebrated as protectors in moments of afflictions and protectors from many diseases and patrons of various groups of people. If we look only in passing at the general hagiographic literature [3,4], or the one dealing with the patrons-protectors connected with medical activities, [5,6] we shall be struck by their numerosity and by the power of cults, which during all these centuries, in spite of the medical progress, keep remaining to be significant [7].

As for giving attributions of protection and patron ship to individual saints and the blessed and their formal confirmation as Patrons the situation is rather very heterogeneous. When the saints connected with medical activities are in question, the reasons and explanations for them to be chosen are indeed numerous. For example, some of them, with more or less probability, pursued the healing activities (the legends list about twenty names of them) or some of them had been even physicians themselves: the Apostle Luke, Alexander Lyonnaise, Zenobius of Sidon Dionysius, St. Pantaleon, St. Cosmas and St. Damian, St. Emilian and about fifteen others, whose list ends with our contemporaries such as Giuseppe Moscati, Jacques Desiré Laval and Riccardo Pampuri [8,9].

In many cases, protecting power was predetermined by the association with diseases from which saints suffered and bravely fought against. An example can serve to witness to it: St Frances with his diseased liver and hydrops; also, St Rochus and the plague, St Lazarus and leprosy, St. Anthony the Hermit and skin diseases. St Jerome had problems with his weakened sight in old age, St. Gregorius, the Great was afflicted with gout. Which and who knows from how many afflictions Hildegard of Bingen had suffered? These cases are similar to the wounds that had been received by the torturers when some parts of the body had been lost and sacrificed. The torturers had been pulling out healthy teeth to St. Apollonia, had been cutting breasts to

St. Agatha, flaying skin to St. Bartholomew and St. Lawrence was burned over live coals. In spite of all, some of them survived. The apostle St. John and St. Benedictus survived after being poisoned and St. Paul after being bitten by the venomous snake[10].

Not rarely the linguistic association associate the name of a Saint with his protective attribute as a kind of word playing. So, for instance, St. Lucia, although her eyes had been spared when tortured, became the protectoress against eye diseases. This happened, because her name derives from the Latin word *lux, lucis* = light as a kind of a metaphor for the sight. Similar thing happened in connection with St. Augustine, if we take the German word *Auge* = eye for the sight metaphor or in case with St. Vitus (Guy), known as Sv. Vid, honoured among Croats and Slovenians ("vid" = eye sight).

Besides, the said connections, there are still many more others from which some could be in many other ways linked up and bear witness to this cause. However, we cannot in many cases find any reasonable "organic" connection, which should not a priori reduce their importance in spite that we are in most cases in the domain of a legend. In order to better understand peculiarity of the phenomenon of St. Agostina Pietrantoni and to determine her position among saints-patrons, and so to come to some, in the introduction given considerations and thoughts, it is necessary for us at least to fragmentarily take a look at the most important details of her biography.

#### **BIOGRAPHY OF THE SISTER OF CHARITY-NURSE AGOSTINA PIETRANTONI**

We have used the rich literature dedicated to this Saint [11-14] when we were writing this paper and the particulars found in the recent biographical sources 15 and Roman Catholic Press [16-18].

Agostina Pietrantoni was born as Livia Pietrantoni on March 27, 1864 at the place called Pozzaglia in the Sabina District, near Rieti in Italy. She was grown-up as the second born among eleven children in a poor peasant family, and owing to the difficult financial status of the family, she completed only elementary school. Not being in despair because of it, she decided to contribute to the family's budget





*Fig 1. Alfovino Messori. Allegorical illustration of St. Agostina's Pietrantoni with the veduta of Rome with the cupola of the St. Peter's Church in Vatican and the Holy Spirit Hospital in the bottom of this figure given on a Church flag (which has been given to the St. Agostina born place by Suore della Carita di S. Giovanna Antida Thouret) (By the kind permission of the Publisher "Suore della Carita di S. Giovanna Antida Thouret-Provincia di Roma", the illustration has been taken from the book: Perugini, R. La logica dela carita. Roma, 1998.)*

and when being, so to speak, still a child, she was working at various jobs, such as when she even was assisting in carrying pebbles and gravel as ballast for road building.

Stimulated by the divine inspiration, this lovely girl had soon taken the decision to totally change her life and went to monastery in which she could with her prayers and modesty dedicate herself completely to generosity and charity towards the most needed, the smallest ones, to the ill and to the deserted. For this purpose she had enrolled in the School of St. Giovanna Antida Thouret, foundress of the Congregation of Nuns of Charity founded at the start of the 19th Century. This will be soon fulfilled in her 22nd year of age, when she had become a Sister of Charity-nurse for the incurably sick. She always was used to call them." My poor".[19] She would spend 9 years in the Holy Spirit Hospital in Rome (founded in 1198) where she had been attending the patients with the most serious illnesses, such as tuberculosis and other, at that time, incurable diseases. For most of them it was their last refuge. Among them there had been those that were later canonized as Saints such as St. Carlo Boromeo and St. Filippo Neri, St. Camillus of Lellis, St. Giovanni Bosco and others.

After she was infected herself with tuberculosis, she worked in the Tbc Ward and there she was stabbed to her death. She died praying God to forgive the murderer. The future Saint looked at her patients as those that had been embittered by the inevitability owing to their ill fate. They were exceptionally difficult to communicate with and foremost totally unpredictable in their movements and reactions. She considered her task as the challenge given to her by God himself. She said: In attending the deathly and bed-ridden sick, I am serving Jesus Christ... I am burning with love for all and I am ready to undergo any sacrifice, even to die, because of my love..."These words, unfortunately would come to be true and be at the end for her fatal. Towards the end of the 1894, a certain wretched person, Giuseppe Romanelli was received as the Patient to the Saint Spirit Hospital. He had already been well known to Police Authorities by his nickname "Pippo er Ciocco" owing to his arrogance, high-handedness and aggressiveness. Unfortunately, he would prove to be such also now, while being hospitalized. This was the reason why he was forcibly discharged



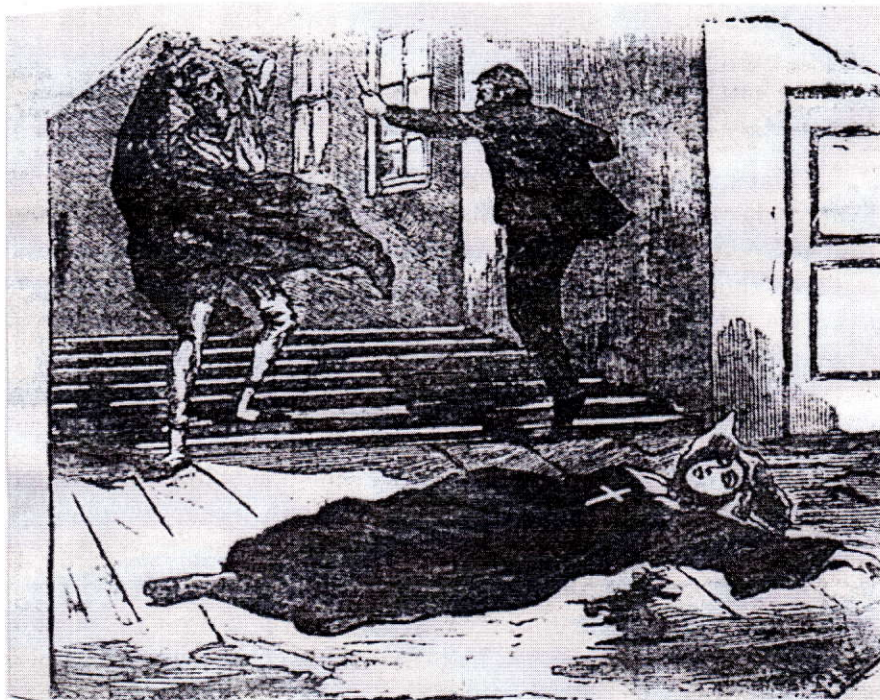


Fig 2. Tragic end of the life of the Sister of Charity - Nurse Agostina Livia Pietrantonio in the Holy Spirit Hospital in Rome on November 13, 1894. (By the kind permission of the publisher the illustrations have been taken from the book: Perugini R: *La logica della carita*, Roma, 1998.

from the Hospital. However, he was convinced that the Sister of Charity - nurse Agostina was guilty of his discharge. At first, he only threatened her and afterwards he decided to wreak his fury and revenge on her.

And, on November 13, 1894, he came back by stealth to the Hospital with intent to murder the Sister of Charity-nurse Agostina and without any inducement; he attacked her with the knife. What were the patient's frame of mind best witnesses the fact that the murderer gave her six stabs to the unfortunate victim in the region of the left shoulder, neck and breast? As witnessed by an eyewitness who happened to be there at that moment, the Sister of Charity-nurse Agostina, although being covered all by her own blood, with the last force



left to her before she died, she said loudly enough to be heard by the furious murderer and who was out of his mind said, that she had forgiven to him. The assassin Romelli, coming somehow to his senses said "Saint Mary help me!" ("Santa Maria aiuta me").

This atrocious crime found powerful response among all people. Everybody was horrified by this terrible crime, but also they were full of great admiration for the martyr, so much so that over one hundred thousand of people were accompanying her to her last resting place. The memory of the Sister of Charity - nurse Agostina will live on forever among the pious simple people, especially among seriously ill, but also among the attendants that have been taking care of them.

After the obligatory time span elapsed, the procedure was installed for her beatification, which Pope Paul the sixth would complete on November 12, 1972 by beatifying the Sister of Charity-Nurse Agostina. On that occasion, the Pope emphasized that Sister of Charity - Nurse Agostina was one of the martyrs who is the dearest to the people of Rome, because she had had the double crown: the crown of a virgin and the crown of a martyr.

After that the beginning of canonization took place. The Holy Father Pope John Paul the Second, on April 18, 1999, canonized Sister of Charity-Nurse Agostina Livia Pietrantoni together with Marcellino Benedetto Champagnat and Don Giovanni Calabrio as a Saint. In the homily held on the Square of St. Peter and also the next day when he spoke to the pilgrims, the Saint Father, among other things, said about the newly canonized Saint: "Evangelical ideal of love of the fellow creature, especially of the smallest ones, the sick, the abandoned, led the Sister of Charity Agostina Livia Pietrantoni towards the peaks of Saintliness. Educated at the School of Giovanna Antida Thouret, Sister Agostina conceived that the love of Jesus Christ required the generous serving to the brethren...Grown up in a family accustomed to hardships and work and deep rooted in Catholic faith, the new Saint embraced the ideal of Saint Vincent that consisted in love, humility, simplicity and expressed in high regard of others, in cordiality, in the sense of obligation to "do good things". Besides, she was

proclaimed the Patroness of the abused, victims of poverty, the impoverished, Protectress of the people ridiculed because of their piety."

## DISCUSSION

Before we engage in further considerations about this Saint as possible Patroness of the psychiatric and neurological workers, let us remind of already existing and generally recognized Patrons of the health and caritative and charitable workers and health institutions. In the official catalogue of Patrons found in the "Bibliotheca sanctorum" [3] we come across the saints connected with the following professions: physicians, dentists, ophthalmologists, radiologists and radiotherapists, pharmacists, medical orderlies, midwives, caritative workers. Besides them, the Patrons of Hospitals are mentioned.

Chronologically looking, from several Patrons-Physicians, the oldest would be Raphael Archangel. The association begins with his name, which in the original means "God has restored him/her to health". Also the escort of the young Tobias and the healer of his father, so that he is iconographically presented with the bowl with a medication in it. Luke the Evangelist (1st century) not only that he was the most instructed and educated among the Evangelists, but it is beyond dispute that he was also the most highly-schooled and trained physician, so that he is called also the "beloved and cherished physician".

Cosmas and Damian (3rd century) are legendary twin-brothers who had distinguished themselves in healing and surgery. Tradition about them was always being amplified with new wonders. This was the reason why they were accepted in Christian tradition as universal Patrons of physicians and surgeons.

Although he had not had the direct connection with the medical activities, Ursicinus (the martyr of the Emperor Maximianus' times), he would in times to come become the Patron of physicians owing to one presentation in legendary "Passion from Ravenna". Within the physicians' profession, some specialistic branches have been given their patrons. St. Apollonia is the patroness to dentists, because as the 3rd century martyr, at the hands of torturers she suffered her teeth having been knocked-out and in. Lambert (bishop in Maastricht-7th century) has been men-

tioned here and there, but from his hagiographic particulars it is impossible to find any trace of his having healed bad teeth.

Ophthalmologists have obtained as their Patroness St. Lucia, the martyr from the 3rd century, not because of her martyrdom but because-as it was earlier said -of the association with her name.

Radiologists and Radiotherapists have chosen Michael the Archangel as their Patron because of one of his distinctive traits, the one they wished them most, the power to defend from the invisible bad might. In their example, these are, probably, the harmful radiations to which they are exposed.

John of Goad (1495-1550) and Camillus of Lellis (1550-1614) are patrons of medical orderlies, sick attendants, because the said Saints organized groups of males to work as volunteers and votives in order to help patients in hospitals, charity homes and almshouses and all places where patients need being helped. Their followers continue to work through the Order of Hospitallers of Saint John of Goad in Spain and the Society of Helpers of the Sick (fathers and brethren Cmilians) in Italy.

Raymond Nonnatus (1204-1240) and Gerard Maiela (1672-1755), are Patrons of midwives. In the first case, the word goes about the association with the nickname (lat. nonnatus = not born), which the future Saint had been given because of the Caesarean section by which he was brought into the world. As soon as he was born, his mother passed away. The other one, i.e. young and modest monk Gerard Maiela was put falsely to the paternity suit, successfully proved his being innocent. So his became among others the Patron not only of pregnant women and unborn children, but also of midwives.

As the old physicians had been preparing the medicines themselves, on the pictures of St. Cosmas and Damian, together with various medical devices, not rarely there is presented a bowl with unguents for giving the sick and the dying the last sacrament or the mortar and the pestle symbolizing the preparation of medicines. This is the reason why the pharmacists have accepted them as their Patrons. Owing to the same reason, i.e. the bowl with the medicine by which the Old Tobias was healed, they accepted Raphael, the Archangel as their Pa-



trons. St. Rochus (14th Century) as the third Patron, was accepted by them probably because they were impressed by the fact that all their medicines against the plague, and even the notorious teriacus were practically unsuccessful, unlike St. Rochus who just in the example of the plague had shown that he was, at the same time, both the successful therapist and also the preventive medicine activist.

The charitable workers - the activity very near to the medical activities - chose as their patron Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), the founder of the missionary order "Lazarists" and women's order "Visitation of Mary" as well as "Daughters of charity", all of whom dedicated themselves to the humanitarian and health care.

As patronesses of hospitals were chosen St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Gertrude. The first was the martyr of early christian times, 3rd century as the universal symbol of erudition and paragon for perseverance in faith. The other one is the French nun from the 7th century, who became the legend owing to her extraordinary quality of patience, which is certainly one of the most needed virtues to both the patients and the attending personnel.

Continuing to argue about St. Agostina, there remains the undisputable fact that during her beatification and canonization, all needed relevant preconditions were affirmed and officially accepted. The Christian virtues that she had been displayed through her faith, hope, love, justice and generosity culminated in her mortal moment by her forgiveness to her murderer. The virtues are the qualities only of the greatest moral heroes who not only that live the life but also end the life of this world "as saints". Connected with these virtues, there are the charismatic qualities and the most various wonders that shed light about upon Saints as the logic consequence. However, while such examples of old Saints are within domain of more or less legends (which should not a priori reduce their importance) in the examples of new, mostly so to say, contemporaneous Saints should be without any uncertainty. This holds good also when we speak about our Saint. As regards her charismatic and the wonders connected with the arguing for her as a Saint, there are numerous arguments in her favour and the

ever-increasing number of her worshippers who visit her native place Pozzaglia Sabina and the Hospital of Saint Spirit of Rome.

## CONCLUSION

By summarizing all what was said, the authors modestly hope, that even with this although fragmentary description, have succeeded to evoke the messages given by the martyrdom suffered by Sister of Charity and Nurse St. Agostina Pietrantoni, who when performing her mission at the Hospital of Saint Spirit of Rome, in 1894 was brutally deprived of her life at the hands of a mentally disturbed patient.

Taking into consideration similar, permanently present, dangers, and appreciating all above virtues in connection with the patronages officially recognized to this Saint, the authors hereby initiate the action that St. Agostina Pietrantoni be proclaimed also as celestial Patroness of all nurses.

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