St. Apollonia: The Patron Saint of Dentistry

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In Rome there stood a shrine in one of the city’s great churches dedicated to St. Apollonia and people were said to travel great distances to ask for the assistance of the saint in a search for an end to their pain by reciting the following:

“O Glorious Apollonia, patron saint of dentistry and refuge to all those suffering from diseases of the teeth, I consecrate myself to thee, beseeching thee to number me among thy clients. Assist me by your intercession with God in my daily work and intercede with Him to obtain for me a happy death. Pray that my heart like thine may be inflamed with the love of Jesus and Mary, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

O My God, bring me safe through temptation and strengthen me as thou didst our own patron Apollonia, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Prayer to St. Apollonia, a Catholic prayer card.

Long before there was any dental profession, men and women who were experiencing dental pain would call upon St. Apollonia (Fig. 1), the patron saint of dentistry, for relief, and recite a prayer similar to the relatively modern one above.

Although a clear line cannot always be drawn between theology and the health sciences, there have been relationships between these two disciplines in the past. As Andrew White (1898) noted, the relationship has not always been an amicable one. It was viewed by many as irreligious to seek methods of curing ailments by natural rather than spiritual means. It became the practice of religious leaders to classify men of science generally with sorcerers and magic mongers. This resulted in the association of atheists with physicians and gave rise to the proverb, “Where there are three physicians there are two atheists.” The religious alternatives to medicine’s cause were various appeals to saints specializing in particular diseases: St. Remy cured fevers, St. Gall cured tumors, St. Valentine cured epilepsy, St. Christopher cured throat disease, St. Eutropius cured dropsy, and so on. In his The Large Catechism, religious revolutionary Martin Luther did not necessarily side with the sciences’ search for answers to ailments in nature, but also denounced the invocation of the help of any being, such as a saint, except for that of God and the Holy Trinity. He called the fasting and honoring of St. Apollonia for help with a toothache an abomination. Luther labeled those who engage in such practices as equivalent to idolaters such as sorcerers and magicians (Bente and Dau, 1921). Despite varying opinions of the ability of a saint actually to help, the question arises, “Why is this saint designated to heal a particular disease. What caused St. Apollonia to become, the healer of toothaches?” As it turns out, the patron saint

Fig. 1 — Copy of a lithograph reproducing an original painting that is part of the Wesseler Collection at the Royal School of Dentistry in Stockholm.
of dentistry had a very significant dental experience of her own.

The year in question in regards to St. Apollonia is 249 A.D. according to Craughwell (2001). He noted that it was the year that Decius inherited the Roman Empire and its waning power. The Roman Army was fighting on defensive fronts against barbarian tribes on all sides of the Empire. Decay was occurring within the Empire. Great cities like Carthage, Ephesus and even Rome itself suffered as senators and other elites retired to their country estates to escape political rivalries and plots resulting in murder. In a desperate attempt to gain favor in the eyes of their ancient gods, Decius published an edict commanding citizens to publicly worship the Roman gods before a local commission. Christians refused to obey the order, triggering their empire wide persecution. The church had weathered flare-ups of persecution in its 250-year history, but never on such a scale.

It should be noted that another recounting of the story placed the time as the same year but under Emperor Philip right before Decius’ ascension. Whichever the case, these conditions set the stage for the martyrdom of St. Apollonia. In the traditional rendition of her tale it is said that during the festivities commemorating the first millenary of the Roman Empire a poet prophesied a calamity caused by the Christians. A mob of the heathen population inflicted “bloody outrages on the Christians whom the authorities made no effort to protect” (Kirsch, 1907). The mob transformed their fervor to violence. Their first victim was Metranus (Metras), who refused to abandon his faith. He was beaten with staffs, reed splinters were impaled in his eyes, and he was subsequently stoned to death. A woman was the next target. Cointha (Quinta) would not pay divine worship to one of their idols when carried to a temple. She reproached their god, enraging them further. The mob then tied her to a horse and dragged her over streets of sharp pebbles until the cruel scourging caused her death. Another of the Alexandria martyrs was a holy man beaten in his own home. Serapion, bruised and his bones broken, was thrown from the roof of his house headlong to end his torture (Resende, 2003).

When Apollonia was apprehended she was ordered to worship the heathen’s stone idols, according to Armstrong (1995). Instead, she made the sign of the cross causing the idols to break into a thousand pieces. The future saint’s teeth were then pulled out by one. (Fig. 2) Another source describes how Alexandrian Christians respected Apollonia for her chastity, religious devotion, and charitable deeds. It then tells of how she refused to offer a pagan sacrifice and so her teeth were all knocked out with a bludgeon. Although how it happened may vary from story to story, they are all consistent in the fact that she did lose her teeth at the hand of her aggressors (McNamara, 2003). After this tortuous attack in which Beresford (2001) mentions her cheeks were torn to shreds, he narrates the malicious manner in which the “venerable old virgin” was threatened with a bonfire in an attempt to coerce her into submission with the threat of throwing her into the “all-devouring flames.” Faced with the choice of reciting the series of “wicked and blasphemous” statements or death, Apollonia paused the mob in an apparent moment of reflection. When her captors released her expecting compliance she hurled herself into the flames sealing her own fate in the inferno and capturing her own place in history and the Christian religion from that time on. O’Connell (1956) claims that this had the added effect of terrifying the blood hungry rioters who were aghast at the notion that a woman was ready to meet death more easily than her persecutors were prepared to deliver it. The story takes on a note of authenticity when it is told by a contemporary of Apollonia’s, Dionysius, who was the Bishop of Antioch from 247 to 265 A.D. He wrote a letter addressed to Fabius that describes the martyrdom of Metras and Quinta and continued as follows:

“At that time Apollonia the parthenos presbutis (virgo presbytera, by which he very probably means not a virgin in advanced years, but a deaconess) was held in high esteem. These men seized her also and by repeated blows broke all her teeth. They then erected outside the city gates a pile of fagots and threatened to burn her alive if she refused to repeat after them impious words (either blasphemy against Christ, or an invocation of the heathen gods). Given, at her own request, a little freedom she sprang quickly into the fire and was burned to death.”

(Kirsch, 1907)

Beckett (1998) does attempt to put a silver lining on the dark cloud of this tragic tale writing that Apollonia accepted her inevitable demise but chose to
bring it about in a fashion that would cause her persecutors to think more deeply and because she was determined to spare them the sin of killing her.

One less well-known version of her story is told as follows:

"Saint Apollonia was the miraculously conceived daughter of rich, barren parents. After nearly giving up hope of being blessed by a child despite constant prayers to her gods, Apollonia's mother begged the Blessed Virgin to intercede. When in her youth the saint learned of the circumstances of her conception, she became a Christian. Directed by an angel, she went to Saint Leonine, a disciple of Saint Anthony, for baptism. An angel then appeared with her baptismal robe and told her to go and preach in Alexandria, which she did...ends with her father giving her up to the authorities for martyrdom."

(Resende, 2003)

From this horrific event arose the legend of a saint who would watch over those who were experiencing a taste of the pain that Apollonia endured on that day, long ago, near the dawn of her Christian religion. Protecting those with a toothache has resulted in her earning the title of the Patron Saint of Dentistry drawing together a profession of medical nature and a figure of a religious import. There was even a New England dental journal honoring her name called 'The Apollonian.' To this day her sacrifice is remembered as people look upon her in ancient art where she is typically portrayed as a pretty young girl rather than the old woman she actually was. (Fig. 3) Armstrong (1995) notes that she is shown wearing a necklace of teeth or holding a tooth in a pair of pincers. She holds her symbol, a palm leaf, to signify her victory over death. The article, Unique Wine Label Features Saint Apollonia (1985), mentioned her likeness and name have even shown up on a particular wine label, the only such label devoted to an important figure in dental history. Bunn (2003) reports that Apollonia's teeth and parts of her jaw can be found in a number of churches across Europe where on February ninth her feast day is recognized. While the saint has been popular in art, Cohen (1975) stated that a few chapels remain that are dedicated to the saint, the oldest of which is in the village of Perelle in the parish of St. Saviour on the island of Guernsey. The martyrdom of St. Apollonia has inspired many forms of art and literature, inspired faith and hope in the devout, and drawn the seemingly contrasting philosophies of medicine and religion together. Her bravery and famous martyrdom persevere in the hearts and minds of those who use the saints in theological capacities, as well as those people in the dental field who have a professional respect for a figure of her import in the history of the dentistry.

References


