

Cyber Saint

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It was inevitable. The internet has earned a patron saint. Actually, it's a contest of sorts. Two candidates have been nominated, but a landslide is in the offing.

The sorry runner-up, and deservedly so, is St. Pedro Regalado (1390-1456). What does he bring to the table, patron saint-wise? He could be at more than one place at a time. Like the internet, get it? Weak.

The winner by acclamation, if not by approbation, is St. Isidore of Seville. He has yet to earn the nod of the Vatican, but a papal imprimatur is optional, as patron saints are often adopted by custom or popularity. And St. Isidore is the popular choice.

As saints go, Isidore (560-636) started with an unfair advantage by pedigree. He shared a mother with St. Leander, St. Fulgentius and St. Florentina. His claim to fame, however, was as a Renaissance man way before there was a Renaissance. Isidore collected, systematized and condensed all the fields of knowledge that existed by his time. His twenty volume "Etymologiae" covered everything from grammar, law and medicine to geography, civil engineering and food. Structurally, this encyclopedic work resembled a database, and it served to preserve and transmit essentially all classical learning for the following eight hundred years, until the real Renaissance took up the slack. In addition to his masterpiece, Isidore wrote widely on other topics, most notably theology. Could there be a better patron for the internet?

Probably not, but this is not the definitive reason to bestow cyber sainthood. The internet may be the catalyst for unprecedented human progress, but it is also history's premier incubator of fraud and immorality. What makes Isidore the perfect choice for the internet is that there was also a fake Isidore.

The pretender or pretenders, writing in the mid-800's under the name Isidore, created (as in made up) a collection of canon law, mostly papal letters and ecclesiastical council decrees, extending back to the first century of the Church. The beauty of this collection, in terms of fraudulence as high art, is that it contains genuine documents and creatively edited genuine documents interspersed among the total fabrications. The purpose and effect of the collection was to create an "historical" precedent for papal power and for the extrication of the Church from subjection to the state that history itself had inconveniently failed to provide.

Included in the collection was a document written more than 50 years earlier that stands as perhaps the single greatest forgery of all time. Known as the Donation of Constantine, it is supposed to be a grant by the emperor Constantine the Great early in the fourth century to Pope Sylvester I in appreciation for having cured his leprosy. At the time of the forgery, the pope was on pretty much equal footing with the patriarchs in the other important centers of the Church in Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Alexandria. The Donation of Constantine extended to the pope, as

the successor of St. Peter, primacy over the four patriarchs and over all bishops in the world, the same honorary rights as the emperor, and dominion over the entire Western Empire. The implication was that Constantine was happy to establish the new imperial capital in Constantinople, leaving the pope to rule the West from Rome as a leader with both religious and temporal power.

The fake Isidore's collection in time earned credibility by being perceived, as it was undoubtedly intended to be, as part of the writings of St. Isidore. It provided in large part the foundation upon which the pope achieved preeminence in the Church hierarchy and considerable secular power. This foundation held firm throughout the Middle Ages, and the forgeries were not seriously contested until the 1500's.

There is some speculation that the Vatican sanction of an internet patron is imminent. Could be. St. Isidore's feast day, April 4th, would be fitting for the announcement. By the time you read this, it might be a done deal. On the other hand, despite Isidore's tremendous service to Western civilization, it took nearly 1000 years for the Vatican to get around to canonizing him. Talk about your slow upload.

(Amici, April 2001; reprinted with permission)