

Revised

Catholic 101 - Miracles of the Saints: Fact or Fiction

Did St. Patrick really drive all of the snakes out of Ireland? The lives of the saints weave a rich and essential tapestry that continues to this day. Their lives inspire us, their miracles amaze us, and their intercession for us is powerful and valid. But some of their stories seem far too wild to be true. Did St. George slay a dragon? When St. Catherine of Alexandria was beheaded, did she truly bleed milk rather than blood? Was the hermit St. Kevin fed each day by an otter that brought him a salmon and a black bird that brought him an egg? And what about St. Rumbald (not Rumbold), who lived for only three days, but begged his parents (opened his mouth and spoke in full sentences) to baptize him? There are biographies of the saints that accurately tell of their lives and courage and faithfulness; many written by their own hand. Think of St. Theresa of Lisieux's *The Story of a Soul*, or St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*. But in there is also what has come to be called hagiography. Hagiography can be understood as a literary genre that combines fact, fiction, and folklore. In the Middle Ages in particular, stories about the saints were told and then written about to promote the "cult" of a particular saint and encourage pilgrimages. Perhaps the best example of this literary genre is the two volume tome titled *The Golden Legends*, written by Jacob de Voragine in the thirteenth century. It wasn't until the seventeenth century that the Church earnestly endeavored to sift through the many stories to try and separate history from legend. But many of these fantastic stories endure to this day. But does it matter? The saints witness the Gospel, but we also must admit that their stories, be they absolutely accurate or somewhat embellished, open up all kinds of possibilities of what can be done by ordinary people who are immersed in God's grace. The theologian Karl Rahner once wrote that the saint is the person who shows an age that it is possible to live as a Christian no matter what the circumstance, be it peace or persecutions. In our day, with so much confusion and suspicion, it's important to remember an crucial lesson from the tradition of the saints: the tales and stories that strain credulity are beside the point, the point being that their very lives offer new ways of living for the truth of the gospel.