

Handicapping the Saints

by Con Chapman

I've been a fan of hagiography—the lives of the saints—since first grade when Claude Dunham and I were asked to represent St. Stephen and St. Sebastian, two martyrs of the early church, in a *tableau vivant* of bored boys. Not content to stand in silence while Sister Mary Agnesita recited the manner of our deaths, we each took the Method Acting approach when our turns came and . . . uh . . . embellished our performances with groans and contortions of pain as we were killed, respectively, by stones and arrows.



St. Stephen, getting stoned

I've maintained an interest in the annual pennant race for sainthood even as I came to follow baseball, basketball, football and late in life, hockey. The nuns and priests who make it to the playoffs are, unlike today's spoiled, overpaid pro athletes, modest team players, subordinating their personal stats to the greater glory of God and the salvation of mankind. That doesn't stop me from laying down a friendly wager every now and then with Maury, my bookie, however.

St. Sebastian: Even in the twilight of his career, the guy kept himself in great shape.

I was itching for a little action just last night. The Sox were losing, and I see no point in betting on NFL preseason games, so I gave Maury a call.



"Y'ello," I heard him say in his familiar cigar-tinged voice.

"Maury, it's me," I said.

"Hey—how's my favorite mark?"

That hurt. A few years ago when the Patriots were killing it, beating the spread every Sunday, a lot of bookies got wiped out. I figured the law of averages was against them, and almost single-handedly kept Maury in business.



"Fine," I said, gritting my teeth. He's like that, always goading you to lay your money down by needling you.

"What can I dooze fur ya?"

"I'm thinking of putting some money on the saints."

"The over/under against Houston is 40 1/2."

"Not those Saints, the saints in Heaven."



"Oh, okay. Lessee, who do you like?"

"What's the line on Pierre Toussaint?"



Pierre Toussaint

"He's the odds-on favorite. Can't give you no better than 7 to 5."

"Aw, come on, Maury. I might as well buy a lottery ticket."

"Look, you mook. He's Haitian, and he was a hairdresser who served the Protestant elite of New York, so he's a three-fer; black, aesthetical and ecumenical. He's a shoo-in."

I could tell I wasn't going to move Maury on a man who, in the words of *The Wall Street Journal*, "has been inching toward sainthood ever since his death in 1853." There's no money to be made on sentimental favorites.

Rev. Augustus Tolton

"How about Augustus Tolton?" I asked in the most ingenuous tone I could muster.

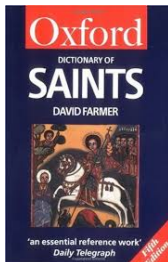
"Who?" Maury asked. Bingo—I'd caught him without the inside dope a handicapper needs to make his vigorish.

"He's . . . uh . . . a pretty good guy. Lotta people think he's a comer, but he's got the Curse of the Cubs thing going."

"He's from Illinois?" I could hear Maury riffling through his Street & Smith's Sainthood Yearbook.

"Yeah—Quincy, on the Mississippi."

"I don't got nothin' on him," Maury said. If only he'd pick up a copy of the Oxford Dictionary of the Saints instead of the Daily Racing Form every now and then, he might learn something.



"He's a pretty good guy."

"Let me look him up," Maury said. "Hmm—the only 'T' in the oddsmakers book is for Teresa, Blessed of Calcutta. She's off the boards."



"Children, live by this rule: On the road, take the points."

"I figured as much. No Tolton's a rookie. They just formed a commission on him to see if he merits sainthood."

"Hmm. So whadda ya thinkin'?"

I inhaled, then took the plunge. "I dunno—I'll lay ya five ta one he's venerable this year, ten ta one he's beatified in 2011."

I heard a tapping sound. Maury was probably checking Vegas and Atlantic City to see what the smart money was thinking. "Wait a minute," I heard him say.

"What?"

"This guy Tolton—he was born into slavery, and was the first black American priest."

"So?"

"Are you kidding? That's like bein' on steroids. And he had an integrated congregation. You're tryin' to sandbag me."

“No I'm not—I'm just . . . ”

“Fuhgeddabout it,” Maury said just before slamming down his phone. “You can't hustle a hustler.”

