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Divine Intervention

It all began with a tale of an enlarged heart.

Observed during a 16th-century posthumous examination, the organ belonging to recently deceased Fillipo Neri was found to have an enormous left ventricle and artery. So muscular was it, in fact, that two of Neri's ribs cracked trying to contain it. This anatomical anomaly was used as evidence that Neri was so full of God's divine love that a regular-sized heart could not contain it — and thus he was officially confirmed St. Fillipo Neri.

A new book by UC Santa Barbara professor of history Brad Bouley delves into Neri's case and beyond. "Pious Postmortems: Anatomy, Sanctity and the Catholic Church in Early Modern Europe" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) illuminates the widespread practice of autopsy in determining sainthood during the 16th and 17th centuries, and explores the complex connection between the spiritual and physical realms in Catholicism.

"I found close to three dozen saints (and only because I stopped looking after that) who were subject to a postmortem," Bouley said. "These were attempts to explore their bodies using a new anatomy to figure out if God had touched them, the idea being that closeness to God is not just a spiritual matter, but would actually change your body." The sheer number of cases convinced him that it was a trend worth exploring.

Many of the bodies, he notes in the book, were observed to have very little decay or to have a particular sweet smell, suggesting they were divinely exempt from the physical process of decomposition and undoubtedly worthy of sainthood. “What the church was trying to demonstrate with these examinations, to the faithful and non-faithful alike, is that what you’re seeing in these bodies can’t be natural, and must therefore be beyond the realm of the natural,” Bouley explained.

In “Pious Postmortems,” Bouley connects founding principles of modern science back to the practice of postmortem examination as sanctioned by the church. “People were starting to use more empirical knowledge, and to learn about nature by experimenting,” he said. “Doctors would sometimes test bodies multiple times, in different atmospheric conditions. Church men, when they’re trying to demonstrate the reality of miracles, aren’t just saying that you have to believe, they’re trying to prove it.”

The practice of postmortem had social implications as well. In the book, Bouley writes that status and gender were key factors in determining holiness, illuminating early modern attitudes about class and sex. “The most invasive examinations, that included probing and clear checks for celibacy, happened to women,” he remarked. “Women were not really allowed to have a public persona, so for a female saint to have a public persona was quite worrisome to people.”

Likewise, Bouley found that canonization was often reserved for the elite. “It was incredibly expensive to have a canonization take place, and to bring a doctor in to look at a body,” he explained. “You had to have rank, or at least have people of rank like you to start the canonization process. It wasn’t just about the evidence, but about who funded the evidence.”

Though the validity of autopsy to confirm holiness began to wane in the 18th century as ideas about the qualifications for sainthood changed, the practice never fully stopped, according to Bouley. “Parts of this still continue,” he said. “The most recent case I know of where a body was exhumed and checked for incorruption was in 2008. It’s not very common, but if someone is reputed to have a miracle of incorruption, they’ll still check it.”

And it’s not just about sainthood. As Bouley noted, the practice of postmortem and the rationale behind it had broader, lasting implications on the modern Catholic Church, where attempts to prove the holy through irrefutable scientific proof

continue. “The desire to use medical evidence to demonstrate the holy is definitely still going on,” he said. “If someone declares a healing miracle to have happened, the church still has panels of expert doctors check it.”

Much of Bouley’s research consisted of sorting through thousands of records in the Vatican Secret Archives, and he said he was especially surprised by the strong connection he found between religious and scientific principles, dating all the way back to the 1500s. “The view today is that science and religion tell different truths, but the general idea at the time was, that’s not true,” he said. “If you really are a good investigator, what you’ll get by looking at nature is closer to God.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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