

## Patron Saints



Everyone has heard the term ‘patron saint’, but many are quite unclear about what this term means. July 25 is the “Patronal Feast” for our parish, because it is the Feast Day of our Patron Saint, James the Apostle. Similarly, Rowland Hall-St. Mark’s School, where I was chaplain, celebrated Saint Mark’s Day for the patron saint of the school, and also Saint Margaret, the patron of our chapel. When an institution, group, or place is named for a particular saint, the people doing so are claiming that saint as patron. Having a patron saint provides a symbol (such as the pilgrim shell for Saint James) and a holy person whose life and works can be an example for the people. It has also been traditionally thought that the patron saint looks after those named for him/her, that we can pray to the saint asking that the saint in turn pray for us. Just as the Sanctus (holy, holy, holy) at each Eucharist is described as our joining in the heavenly songs of praise, we understand that those gathered around the throne of God in glory also continue their life of prayer. So our patron saints include us in their prayers. This is also true for individuals. When one is given a saint’s name at baptism, one has also been given that saint as a patron. An old tradition also has people claim an additional saint’s name (and patronage) at confirmation. In that system, one has a ‘baptismal name’ and a ‘confirmation name’. When people enter the ‘religious life’ (becomes, monks, nuns, etc.), they take new names, names of saints who become linked to them in their new lives. So there are a variety of occasions on which one can acquire a patron saint. Most often today people think in terms of the patron saints of professions and activities. These are usually chosen because their lives (or often their deaths) connect them to the activity. (The patron saint of tanners was flayed. The patron saint of doctors was himself a doctor.) To have a patron saint then, whether as an individual or an institution, a country or a profession, is to have a person of demonstrated faith who joins in our prayers, is an example of holy life, and gives us a special link within the Communion of Saints, the gracious company of all faithful people whom we celebrate on All Saints Day – and throughout our Christian lives. They are our sponsors in this wonderful life in Christ.