

MEET AWAKE'S PATRON SAINTS

ST. CHARLES LWANGA

Charles Lwanga was born in 1860 as a member of the Baganda tribe in what is now modern Uganda. He converted to Catholicism during the reign of a king who was tolerant of Christianity. However, a new king – King Mwanga II – soon came into power. He saw Christianity as a threat to his authority and began a fierce persecution of both Catholics and Anglicans in his kingdom.

King Mwanga was also a sexual predator, who victimized the teenage boys and young men in his court, particularly the royal pages. When Charles Lwanga was made chief of these pages, he used every means in his limited power to try to protect them from the king's predation. He also preached the Gospel to these pages and encouraged them to remain faithful in the midst of fear, persecution, and abuse.

When King Mwanga learned of Charles Lwanga's activities, he commanded all of the pages to come before him and he interrogated them about whether they were Christians. When the king asked them if they would keep their faith, they shouted together, "To the death!"

King Mwanga then sentenced all of these pages to death, including 26 year old Charles Lwanga. They were bound and forced to march for two days to their execution site. On June 3, 1886, Charles Lwanga was separated from the others and burned at the stake.

Charles Lwanga is often recognized alongside St. Joseph Mkasa, who served as the chief of pages right before Charles. Joseph's bravery in speaking out against King Mwanga's predations led to his own martyrdom - and inspired Charles Lwanga to take up the fight after him. Both are also honored along with the larger group of 22 teenagers and young men who are today referred to as the Ugandan Martyrs.

When we look to Charles Lwanga as an example of courage in the face of sexual violence, we remember that he found this courage in community – just as we do in the Awake community today.

We do not know whether Charles Lwanga himself ever experienced sexual abuse in the king's court, but we know he fought to defend the vulnerable people in his care, even when it meant risking everything.

Saint Charles Lwanga, pray for us.

ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

Awake's second new patron is a popular saint among many Catholics – Saint Catherine of Siena.

Catherine di Jacopo di Benincasa lived during the 14th century in Siena, Italy. She was the 23rd child in her working class family, and began to have mystical experiences from a very young age. Catherine was such a happy child that she was given a nickname that means “joy,” but she was also very pious and as she grew older she wanted to devote most of her time to solitary prayer.

Through that prayer, she eventually felt called to re-engage with the wider community. She became a Third Order Dominican and faithfully served the poor, sick, and abandoned in her city. She began to develop a reputation for holiness and people started to come to her for advice. In spite of the many barriers to female leadership, she was soon surrounded by a devoted group of followers, male and female, lay and ordained. Eventually, she felt called to engage with current affairs at first in Siena, and then throughout Italy. She traveled across the region and dictated many letters to both political and religious leaders, who were often persuaded to the course of action she suggested.

Catherine lived at a time of great tumult, division, and corruption in the Catholic Church, and she worked passionately for unity and integrity. She was not afraid to call Church leaders to account, reminding them with powerful words of their responsibility to the people of God.

During this time of division, the Pope had relocated from Rome to Avignon, France, which Catherine saw as a cowardly decision that only led to greater division. She carried on a long correspondence with Pope Gregory XI, encouraging him to return to Rome, reform the clergy, and bring unity to the Church. She faced a great deal of opposition from various members of the hierarchy but none were able to intimidate her or sway her from what she believed to be right. In time, the Pope did return to Rome and eventually Pope Urban VI summoned her to consult with him there.

Catherine spent the remainder of her days in Rome, serving the poor and sick, advising the Pope, and tirelessly working for the renewal of the Church. She also dictated her visions and insights to trusted companions, who compiled them into what is now known as “The Dialogues” of St. Catherine of Siena.

We were drawn to St. Catherine as a patron for Awake because she saw the ways that the Church of her time had gone astray from its mission and courageously worked for reform and renewal. She was deeply rooted in prayer, and even in the face of deep

opposition by Catholic leaders, she never lost her love for Jesus or her beloved Church.
Saint Catherine of Siena, pray for us.

3. STS. MARY AND ABRAHAM OF EDESSA

Our next patron is actually two individuals that we are honoring together – Saints Mary and Abraham of Edessa. ***Their story is incredibly powerful and appropriate to Awake's work, but please be aware that it includes a mention of sexual assault that could be triggering.***

Mary and Abraham are lesser-known saints who lived in the fourth century in the town of Edessa in Syria. Abraham came from a wealthy family, but he left this wealth behind to follow Christ as a hermit, building himself a small cell outside of the city where he could pray in solitude. Abraham later adopted his niece, Mary, after her parents died when she was seven years old. Mary learned the faith from Abraham and began to live near him as a female hermit, also known as an anchoress.

Mary and Abraham lived a holy life devoted to prayer and asceticism for 20 years. But one day a corrupt monk took notice of Mary when he was visiting her uncle. This monk began to visit Mary frequently, befriending the innocent young woman and building a sense of intimacy and trust. After a year of grooming, he raped her.

In the aftermath of this assault, Mary was filled with shame and could not bring herself to tell her uncle what had happened. Convinced that she could never again be holy, she fled from her home and her life as an anchoress.

While Abraham did not know what had happened, he experienced a series of dreams about a dove being eaten by a dragon. He realized that his niece was in danger, but he had no way of knowing how to find her. It took Abraham two years to learn where Mary was, and he was devastated to hear that she was living in a distant city as a prostitute. Then this man, who had not left his cell for decades, disguised himself as a soldier and went off to find her. When Abraham finally went to speak to Mary at the brothel, he hardly recognized her.

We don't know what their conversation was like that day, but we know that Mary eventually agreed to return home with her uncle and recommit herself to prayer and holiness. Within a few years, God began granting miracles through Mary, and people from all over the region flocked to see her. She lived 50 years after Abraham's death and remained faithful for the remainder of her life.

It's important to note that Mary's story has often been told in a very different way – a way that holds her responsible for the monk's assault, not recognizing the power differential that makes consent impossible in a situation like this. Hearing her story now, it's easy to understand the devastating impact this shocking trauma had on Mary, and the way that shame and guilt led her to painful choices in the aftermath of her assault. But it's

also a hopeful story, of an uncle who came without judgment to bring his niece home, and a woman who eventually found healing and was able to share that divine healing with others.

Mary of Edessa, herself a survivor of sexual abuse by a Catholic leader, is a powerful patron for all the survivors in the Awake community, and Abraham provides a powerful example for all who seek to support and accompany survivors on their journey of healing.

Saints Mary and Abraham of Edessa, pray for us.

ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

Our next patron saint holds a special place in the hearts of many Catholics – St. Michael the Archangel.

St. Michael has a long history in Christian tradition, and he is also revered in Judaism, Islam, and the Baha'i faith. The earliest surviving mentions of his name are in Jewish works from the 3rd and 2nd century BC, where he is described as the chief of the angels, responsible for the care of Israel.

Christians adopted many of the Jewish traditions surrounding St. Michael, and he is mentioned by name in the New Testament Letter of Jude and in the Book of Revelations. In Revelations, he is depicted as a powerful warrior, leading the angels in battle against the ancient dragon who represents Satan.

Since the early days of Christianity, St. Michael has been called upon for protection and guidance, particularly in the face of the forces of evil and darkness. He is also considered a symbol of divine justice

While the word “saint” usually refers to a human being who is now in heaven with God, the word saint comes from the Latin word “sancta,” meaning holy one, so the archangels Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael are often referred to with the title “Saint.”

When we were choosing patrons for Awake, we heard from many survivors that they are drawn to “warrior” saints like Michael the Archangel, because they need to know that someone powerful is in their corner, fighting for them.

Asking for the intercession of St. Michael reminds us of the high stakes of this battle against abuse and corruption, and points us to the truth that any victory ultimately comes from God.

Saint Michael the Archangel, pray for us.

OUR LADY UNDOER OF KNOTS

Our final patroness is our Mother Mary, under the title Our Lady Undoer of Knots.

As you know, Catholics honor Mary under many beautiful names and titles, but this particular devotion has its roots in Germany in the year 1700. The story goes that a married couple who were on the verge of separation requested prayers from a local priest, who asked the Virgin Mary to untie all the knots in their marriage. When peace was restored between husband and wife, an artist was commissioned to create a painting of Our Lady Undoer of Knots as a gesture of gratitude for her intervention.

The original Baroque painting still hangs in a Bavarian church, but this specific devotion to Our Lady only became more popular in the late 20th century, when it spread from Germany and Austria to Latin America, especially Argentina and Brazil. The devotion has become more popular in the last ten years, since Pope Francis began to share his own devotion to this image of Mary as a problem-solver who can undo all the knots in our world and in our lives.

It's interesting to note that the original German word used in this devotion implies that the knots are not just undone or untied but dissolved completely.

We recognize that the reality of sexual abuse and institutional betrayal in the Catholic Church has tied all kinds of knots in the Catholic Church and in our world, and the trauma of abuse can tie knots within victim-survivors, complicating their ability to relate to themselves, to God, to the Church, and to other people.

When we call on Our Lady Undoer of Knots, the Awake community recognizes that the problems we are facing are simply beyond our capacity to untie. Through the intercession of Mary, we place our trust in God who makes awakening, transformation, and healing possible.

Our Lady Undoer of Knots, pray for us.