

St Romuald
(of Ravenna)



Some time ago someone sent me a copy of the icon of St Romuald that I have printed on the front cover, but try as I might I haven't been able to discover who the artist was or the place where this image is displayed. It appears to have been modelled on the fresco painting on the back page. Considering how relatively unknown St Romuald seems to be, at least in this country, there are a remarkable number of images of the saint on the internet if you search around. Sadly he always looks very stern and grumpy (a bit like myself really! – I thought I'd say that before anyone else did) - perhaps careworn would be a better word to use, and also looks quite old in his pictures and icons (he was 76 when he died) but maybe, saint or not, he had a lot to look careworn about by that stage in his life. Logically, of course, a potential saint would be in their later years, or more likely would have already gone to their reward, before anyone would have thought to capture their likeness.



Romuald was born in Ravenna in the north-east of Italy in about 951. As a young man he indulged in the pleasures and sins of the world that were typical of the lifestyle of a 10th century nobleman. Then, as a young man, he witnessed a bloody duel between his father and a relative over a piece of property, a duel his father won, but was so appalled by the hatred and violence of his family that he fled to a nearby monastery to do forty days of penance, but then made a decision to pursue a life of solitude by joining the community there. However the lifestyle was still not strict enough for him, and his correction of the less zealous monks aroused such animosity that he requested permission to move to Venice where he lived a life of considerable severity under the direction of a hermit named Marinus.

Romuald then spent ten years living in a hermitage attached to the Benedictine monastery at Cuxa where he studied and refined his ideas concerning the monastic life. For some thirty years after that he travelled around Italy founding and reforming monasteries and hermitages. So dynamic was his personality that members of noble families and even the king's sons joined him in the monastic life. He was persuaded by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III to accept the vacant office of abbot at Sant'

Apollinaire to help reform the way of life in the monastery, but the monks resisted his efforts and after a year he resigned, hurling his abbot's staff at Otto's feet in frustration. Once again he sought a life of solitude.

He founded his most famous monastery in 1012 at Camaldoli in Tuscany. Here he combined the cenobitic life of St Benedict (monastic life lived in community) with that of hermits, creating a new monastic family and a new monastic tradition. The Camaldolese Order exists to this day and are one of the great branches of monasticism. Several of his monasteries became centres for the training of priests and missionaries. Romuald died at one of his monasteries, Val di Castro in Tuscany, on June 19th, 1027. In 1481, in the process of transferring his relics to Fabriano, his body was found to be incorrupt.¹ He was canonised by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582.

There is an inscription around the arch of the icon of St Romuald on the front page. It is the first two lines of what is called “Romuald’s Brief Rule” which he formulated specifically for monks and nuns, but which is also appropriate for anyone seeking an approach to some degree of solitude in their lives, and to prayer in general:

Sit in your cell as in paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish. The path you must follow is in the Psalms – never leave it. If you have just come to the monastery...take every opportunity you can to sing the Psalms in your heart and to understand them with your mind. And if your mind wanders as you read, do not give up; hurry back and



*apply your mind to the words once more. Realize above all that you are in God’s presence, and stand there with the attitude of one who stands before the emperor. Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes and eats nothing but what his mother brings him.*²

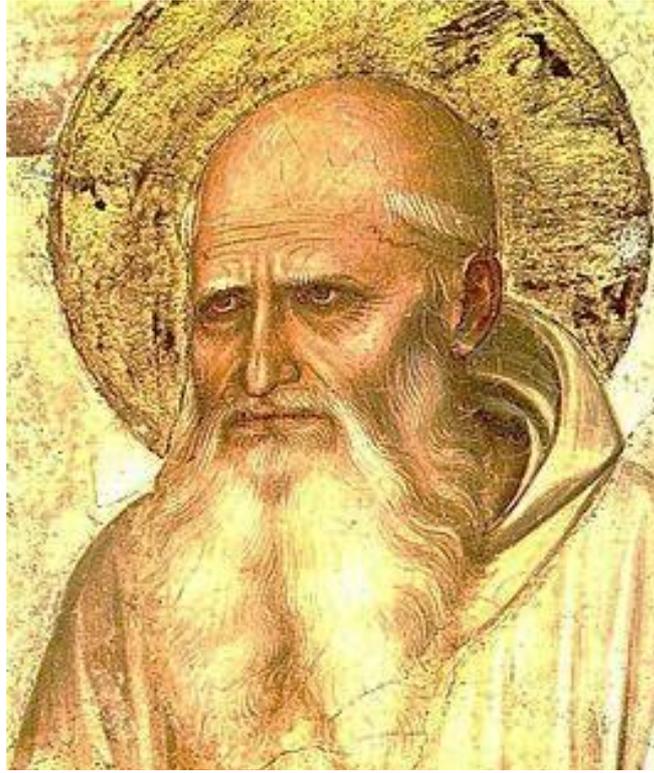
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The church of St Mary & St Romuald in Yarm was opened on May 3rd, 1860, and was dedicated to Our Lady of York, Mother of Mercy, as well as to St Romuald of Ravenna. The Catholic Meynell family owned the land that had formerly been a Dominican Friarage. The church, built on a corner of their land, was the son Thomas Meynell’s wedding gift to his new bride. They had spent their honeymoon in Florence and lived there for a while, and had come into contact with the Camaldolese monks. Their resulting devotion to St Romuald was the reason why his name appears in the dedication of the church.

¹ The information on the life of St Romuald is taken from the *Wikipedia* website, and from *The One Year Book of Saints* by Rev Clifford Stevens.

²From a 2005 article by Sr Laurel M. O’Neal, Er.Dio., celebrating the Feast of St Romuald.

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(This popular image of St Romuald is taken from a much bigger picture entitled *Crucifixion and Saints*, a fresco by Fra Angelico in the Convento di San Marco in Florence)

