

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Sword

Hidden

Saints and angels in churches are often armed with mighty swords. This is usually taken [as being symbolic](#), the sword either signifying some violent death of a martyr or the might of the Lord. I'm not so sure about this. Christianity, like Islam, did indeed spread by the power of the word to some extent, but more often than not the power of the sword was the decisive factor. e.g. in the continent America.

- "Speak softly and carry a big stick" was a guiding principle for the American president Theodore Roosevelt. Early missionaries like St. Bonifatius, Charlemagne, Columbus or Pizarro acted more on the promise of "speak softly and carry a big sword". The less holy ones like Charlemagne converted a lot of reluctant heathens to good Christians by having their heads chopped off.
- When I encounter heavily armed saints in churches and other places I often get the impression that the artists wanted to convey a bit of the more violent aspects of Christianity besides just the symbolic stuff. Below are some examples

The most fearsome swordbearers are cherubs or (arch) angels wielding a flaming sword. I haven't encountered a good rendering of a cherub so far (a concoction of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle plus lots of wings). The [Cherubim in the Hagia Sophia](#) not only doesn't carry a sword but looks a bit woebegone if not actually afraid of something. There are, however, several pretty if fearsome Ladies with a flaming sword around.

- A flaming sword is a sword glowing with flame by some supernatural power. It should not be confused with flame-bladed sword that is just a regular sword with a characteristically undulating style of blade. Adam and Eve encountered a flaming sword when they were kicked out of paradise.

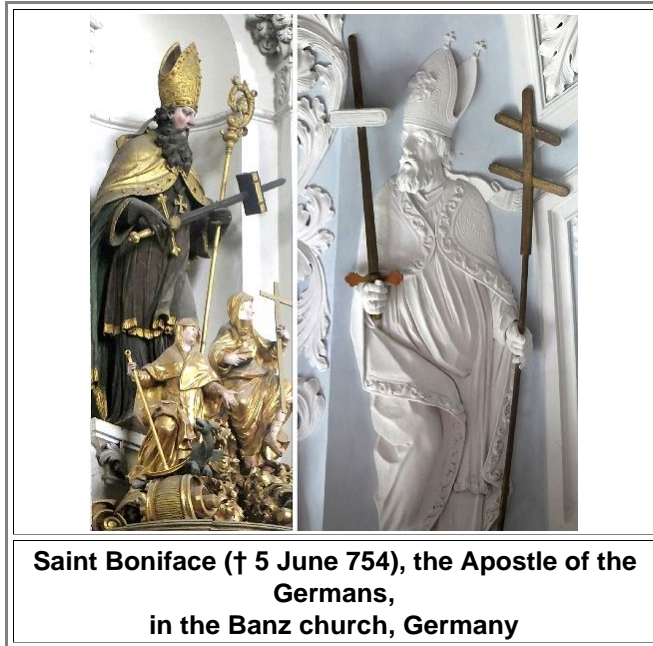


- Raised sword in the left, and palm frond in the right. The message is clear: Submit or else

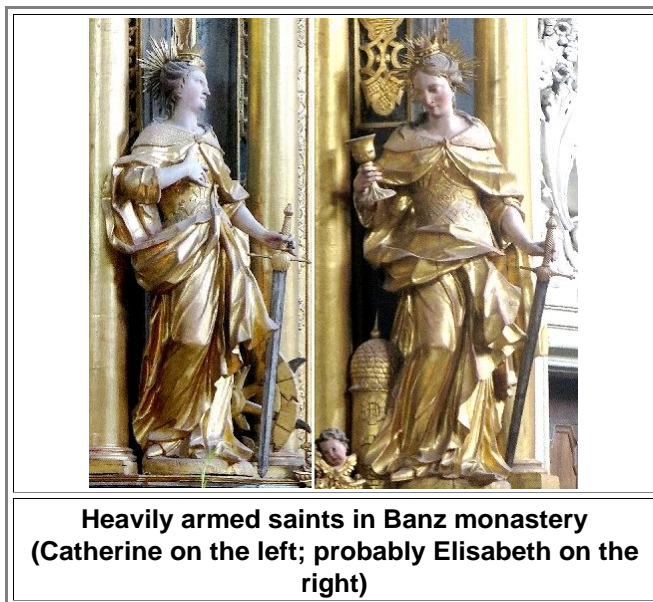


Angel with flaming sword inside a church in Bamberg, Germany

- This female angel obviously knows how to wield a sword; witness the fencing position. She is casting out the devil and not defending paradise.



- Speak softly and hit them with the bible? Not really. Saint Boniface is often shown with a bible impaled on his sword. It symbolizes that he tried to protect himself (unsuccessfully) with a bible from the sword blows that killed him.



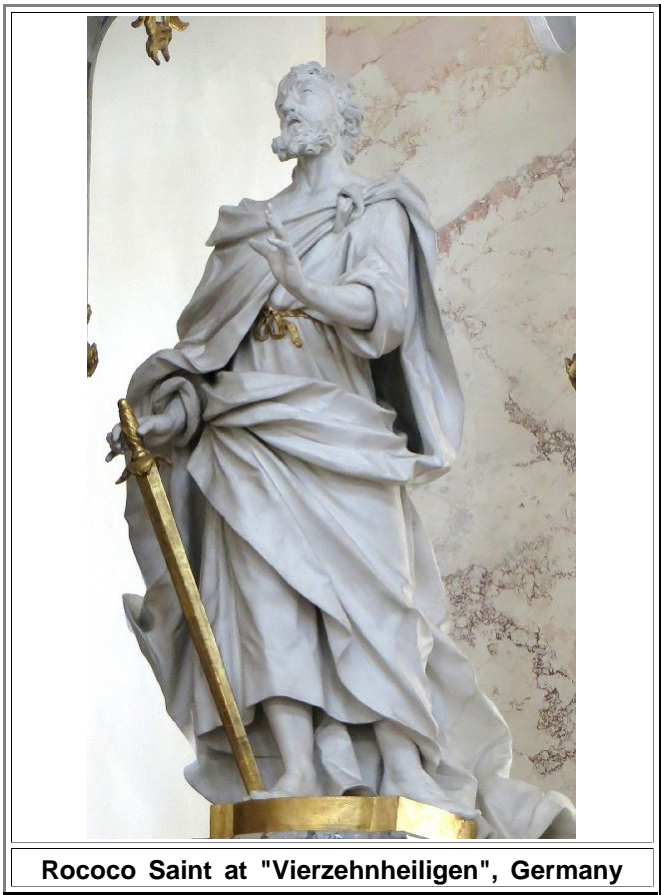
The church of the Banz monastery, started in 1710, is one of the most beautiful baroque churches in Europe. Interestingly, everybody in there is heavily armed and the central altar painting depicts a beheading in loving detail.

- ▀ Some Saints were immune to beheading and thus needed no sword. The way they were killed (eventually) is clear from the way they are shown.



St Dionysius (Denis) in the Basilika Vierzehnheiligen, Germany

● Moving from Banz monastery across the river Mainz to "Vierzehnheiligen" (Basilica of the Fourteen Holy Helpers), one finds one of the most beautiful rococo churches of Europe. There are armed saints too, at Vierzehnheiligen but not quite as many as in the Banz monastery and with far smaller swords.



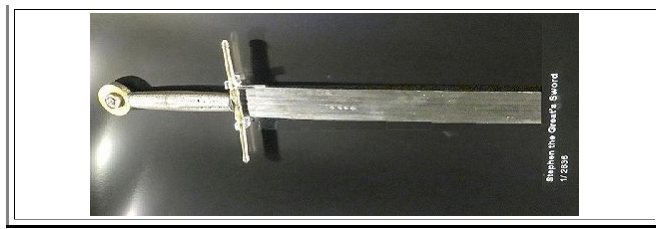
Rococo Saint at "Vierzehnheiligen", Germany

● All those armed Saints look much alike:

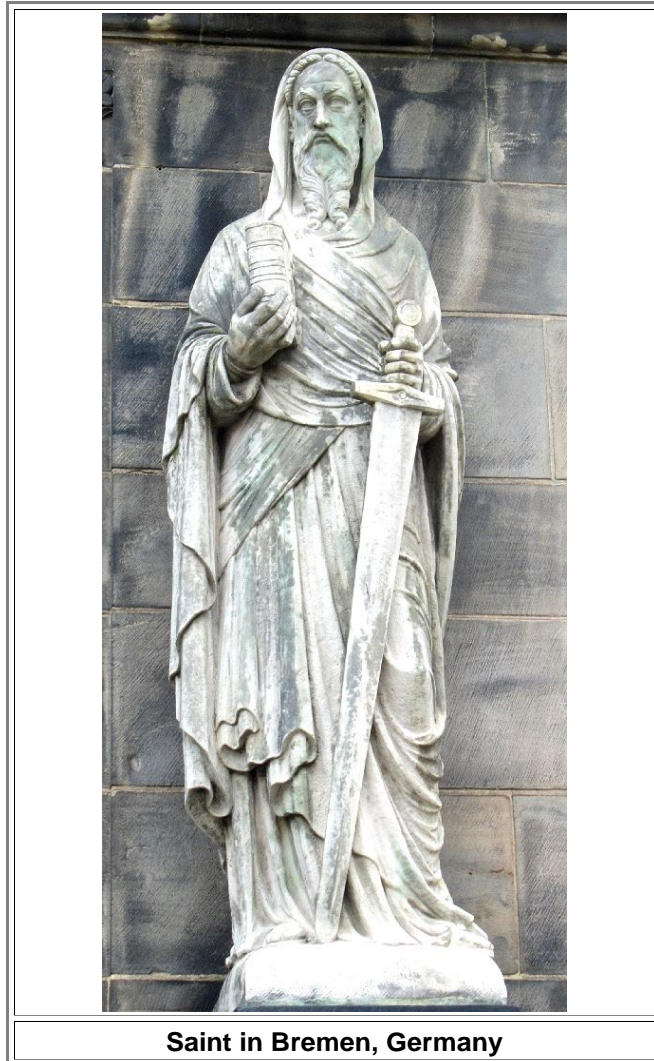


- ▾ Here is a professional sword bearer *and* a Saint: Stephen III of Moldavia, also known as **Stefan the Great** (1433, 1504). He won 46 of his 48 battles; in particular he gained a decisive victory over the Ottomans at the Battle of Vaslui in 1475, *keeping the "Turks" out of Europe*. He was canonized in 1992 by the Synodic Council of the Romanian Orthodox Church.
 - The monument goes back to 1923 but was not in evidence when Moldavia was part of the Russian empire. On August 1989, two years before Moldavia became independent, the monument was returned to its original location,
 - His sword, by the way, is displayed in the Topkapi palace in Istanbul. Obviously the Turks took it in one of the two battles he lost.





▀ The sword of this morosely looking guy is a bit too large to just symbolize his violent death, me thinks. The same is true for the St. Paul below



Saint in Bremen, Germany



St. Paul in a picture in Coburg, Germany

Here we have Johann Friedrich der Großmütige, Kurfürst von Sachsen (1503 - 1554) or John the Magnanimous, Elector of Saxony. Not a Saint but at least magnanimous.

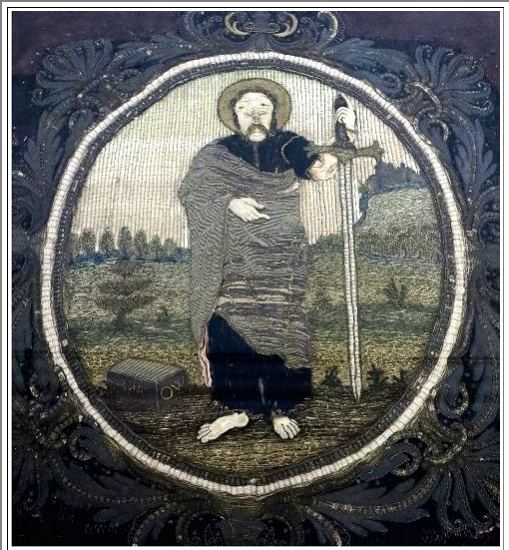
Looks like you can't be magnanimous all the time; on occasion heads need to roll.



Painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder; Berlin

▶ This beauty I found on what appears to be an altar cloth (containing the usual very Christian motifs in other places) in the castle of Eutin in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. It was made from chewed bread and textiles.

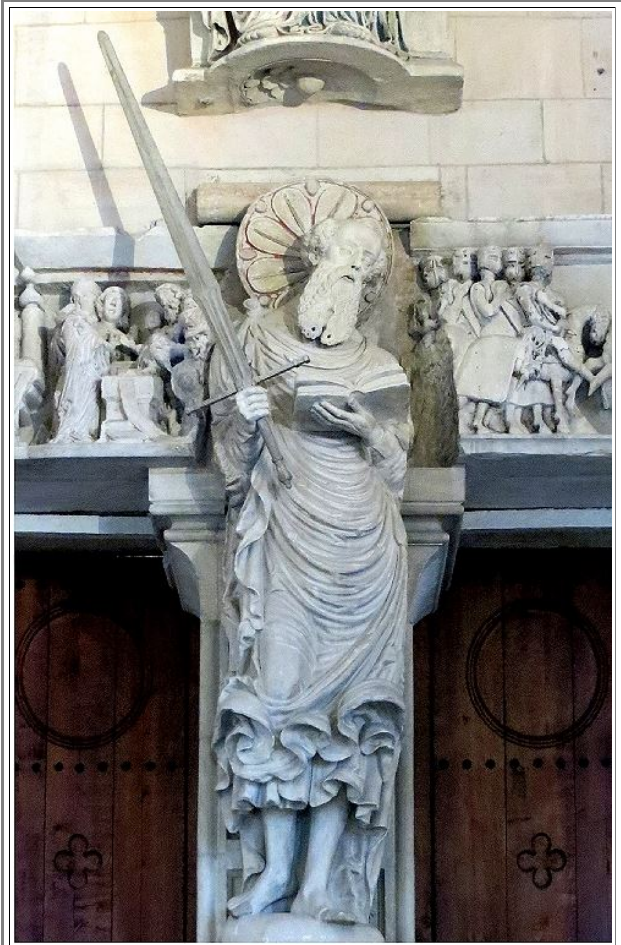
● The guy most certainly looks like a highway robber but must be a Saint as we know from the context.



Saint or highway robber?

▶ Münster in Germany is a town named after its cathedral (or "Münster" if the edifice turned protestant at some time).

● There are plenty sword related things in there; here is a heavily armed saint:



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