

Rumor of saints: St. Expeditus

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

"Bibfeldt's back" was the slogan of the University of Chicago Divinity School Association's recent celebration of theologian Franz Bibfeldt after a decade of well-deserved neglect. If he is new to you, Google will tell you more about him than you want to know.

Bibfeldt drastically influenced my career. I was sent to graduate school as punishment for having co-invented him as a hoax on my seminary's faculty. During one Bibfeldt celebration, former radio commentator Charles Collingwood visited the Bibfeldt relics—autographed pictures by notables—and announced: "You do not have to have existed in order to influence people."

This principle applies to some of the saints in the Roman *Martyrology*. Readers may remember that in 1969 Pope Paul VI removed St. Philomena from the calendar of feast days. Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, told the press that others beside Philomena were removed, "but he could not remember their names." The *Martyrology* experts also questioned Sts. George and Christopher, and some claimed that these two valiants had not existed. But though they could be downgraded, they could not be made to disappear. Cardinal Medina himself claimed St. George as his patron. And there were too many St. Christopher medals dangling from rear-view mirrors and in religious goods shops to have the saint no longer inspire and protect.

All this came to mind when I read that the church in Brazil doubts that one St. Expeditus ever lived, and discourages devotion to him as "patron saint of urgent causes" (*Wall Street Journal*, April 15). Could he be a cousin of St. Rita of Cascia, the patroness of such desperate causes as Pen-ultimates, the ancestor of this M.E.M.O. column? Co-writer Dean Peerman and I included a column about her in a book collection.

Among the unemployed in Brazil, St. Expeditus is regarded as patron, friend, miracle-worked and job-finder. He regularly appears on holy cards, billboards, home-made altars and Internet sites. He is represented as a soldier, the *WSJ* informs us,

holding a cross with the word Hodie, "Today," on it. His foot is on a raven labeled "Tomorrow."

From where did Expeditus come? Matt Moffett says that some church historians speculate that St. Expeditus rose from nonexistence to celebrity when Parisian nuns opened a crate of relics from Rome. The box was marked "expedited" for quick delivery, but the good nuns, misreading the label, revered the relics and the veneration began. Some scholars dispute this story and say that veneration of the expediter is centuries old. I hope that's true, and not a horrible presaging of a new class of saints named after the Latin translations for "Duct Tape," "This End Up," "Overnight," "Special Delivery" and other labels on shipped goods.

So perhaps Expeditus did not exist and the Vatican only "tolerates" devotion to him. Fernando Altemeyer of São Paulo University says that "people who pray to Expeditus are less interested in religious history than in finding an anchor in today's uncertain global economy." Understandably.

Expeditus has evangelical competition in Brazil. Luiz Carlos Santana, pastor of the Door to Heaven Evangelical Mission near the St. Expeditus chapel, is miffed that the saint's presence undercuts his services, which include rites to expel evil spirits from congregants. He says, "I will give the Catholics credit for clever marketing." German Protestants are not so good at marketing, which is why there is no veneration of St. Franz Bibfeldt, who did not exist, but who certainly influenced me.