

In Mediterranean Europe, St. Benedict the Moor is back

The Afropean saint is reemerging amid a swelling African diaspora.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



SAINT ABOVE: In a photo from Nicola Lo Calzo's collection *Binidittu*, African teens play soccer in front of a mural of St. Benedict the Moor in Palermo, Italy. Photo by Nicola Lo Calzo. (Used by permission of L'Artiere.)

Benedict Manasseri was born in Sicily in 1526, the son of African enslaved parents. After earning a reputation for his deep sanctity and healing powers, he joined the Franciscan order in 1562. Popular veneration grew following his death in 1589, when he was remembered as St. Benedict the Moor, a beloved figure in the era of the Counter-Reformation. He was canonized in 1807, the first Black saint in modern times. Repeatedly throughout history, that racial element has attracted and sometimes disturbed believers. But in contemporary Europe, Benedict is acquiring a whole new relevance.

Benedict has had special appeal for Black followers. Several historically Black Catholic parishes in US cities bear his name, and he is popular in Brazil. Sicily itself,

however, has always evidenced some ambiguity about his background. After more than a century as the unofficial patron saint of Palermo, and sometimes of the whole island, he was gradually displaced. Images of him evolved to shift the focus from the saint himself to the very White figure of the infant Jesus that he carries.

Such moves stirred up little controversy at a time when Black faces were rarely encountered in Sicily. But that situation has changed rapidly in modern times, with the growth of immigration from the North African Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past decade, the Mediterranean has been the setting for a migrant crisis on an alarming scale, as thousands of would-be newcomers have perished attempting to cross the sea. Today, 2 percent of Italians are of recent African origin, and the number is growing steadily.

More broadly, the swelling African diaspora is forcing Europeans to rethink their history—to recall times in history when the Mediterranean was a highway rather than a border and when faiths, cultures, and ethnicities interacted extensively. Augustine and Tertullian were indubitably North African, and Euro-African encounters were much alive in Benedict the Moor's time, the 16th and 17th centuries, as well. If the Mediterranean is Mare Nostrum (our sea), then who are the we who seek to apply that term? That question is doubly relevant to European Christians, who find themselves hosting thriving communities of enthusiastic African fellow believers. (Many of Italy's recent migrants are Muslim, but the Christian share is substantial as well.)

A dazzling and provocative collection of photographs by Nicola Lo Calzo focuses attention on these matters. His 2017–2019 series *Binidittu* is forthcoming in book form next month from L'Artiere, with English and Italian text. The title is drawn from the local dialect form of Benedict. *Binidittu* is a reflection on religion, race, and identity in the larger Mediterranean world, of which the “Afropean” Benedict was a noble exemplar. More broadly, the book is a meditation on memory and forgetting, on recalling the racial complexities that Europeans knew in earlier times.

Some of the photos depict what we might term traditional European piety: conservative and often elderly White Sicilians venerating the saint and carrying his images in procession, holy figures showing the Black saint and the Christ Child. But many show young Black men in classic or stereotypical settings of traditional Italy, with their hands highlighted against the gleaming white marble that churches so often use to emphasize holiness and purity. Black hands hold an ornate chalice. A

sizable tattoo of Binidittu appears on a Black arm. A modern-day Congolese friar drapes his arms around a white marble bust.

Some images explicitly draw on the iconography of mannerist or baroque art, but using African faces. These photographs use the setting of a thousand pious Italian paintings that we know from so many art galleries, with all the well-known topography and vegetation, except that the central figure is an African.

Epitomizing the series is a photograph of one modern-day friar, Dieudonné Benedetto, from the Ivory Coast, who reached Sicily by boat and subsequently discovered the story of his African predecessor. Dieudonné stands in his friar's robe in a classic stance of heavenly supplication, in a setting that is just waiting for El Greco—a refugee from an earlier epoch—to come and capture the moment on canvas.

For me, the most memorable image shows a group of African youngsters playing soccer under the watchful gaze of an African-featured Benedict the Moor painted on the side of an apartment block, some 60 feet high. The mural is the work of contemporary Palermo artist Igor Scalisi Palminteri, who shares Lo Calzo's fascination with European-African encounters, as reinterpreted through Catholic iconography. Another of his murals depicts St. Erasmus (Elmo), traditionally a patron saint of sailors, but here shown clutching two oars and wearing a life jacket, in an obvious reference to the thousands of Africans who brave the seas each year to reach Europe.

St. Binidittu speaks forcefully to contemporary Europe.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The reemergence of St. Benedict the Moor."