

BEST SHRINE

BY CONSTANCE ADLER



PHOTOS BY CHERYL GERBER

The inscription over the door to the chapel announces that I am approaching "The National Shrine to St. Roch, Patron Saint of Miraculous Cures, In Fulfillment of Vow 1875." Whenever I cross the threshold into the St. Roch chapel, it is as though I am stepping out of ordinary time and space. The soft light that filters down from the diamond-paned windows in the high vaulted ceiling — sky blue with gilded medallions — always feels cool and shadowy, even when it is a baking hot August afternoon outside. The floors are aged marble, and there are two sets of pews, one roped off with yellow caution tape, as it is too broken for sitting. I rarely see anyone else here, except for the cemetery caretaker once in a while.

What I love the most about the place is that it is a departure from mundane chatter. There is no noise save for the fan hum and faint traffic sounds that are so distant and rare they seem like whispers you almost thought you heard. The air moves a little in here, but nothing else does. It is a place of lovely stillness, dust and quiet.

The altar paintings depict episodes in the life of St. Roch, who is the intercessor for victims of pestilence and plague. This chapel stands as a testament to the miracle he granted when Fr. Peter Leonard Thevis, the pastor of Holy Trinity Catholic Church, prayed to St. Roch, promising to build a shrine to the saint if he would spare the parish from the yellow fever plague in 1868. Legend has it that not one Holy Trinity parishioner died in the plague.

But this saint doesn't just deal with the big plagues. The story with St. Roch is that he will also grant miraculous healing to individual sufferers who ask for his intercession. Not only that, he is also kind to dogs. There is a chipped statue of St. Roch, festooned in cobwebs and termite wings, with his dog by his side. The dog carries a loaf of bread in his mouth and looks up adoringly at St. Roch. This is a saint after my own heart.

A tattered notebook and a blue pen lie on the altar. Remnants of dead cockroaches litter the page. This is where petitioners write their messages to St. Roch.

"Thanks for the encephalitis cure," says one.

"I ask for my son to live a long life, dear God. Please help with his AIDS."

"Thank you for helping Grace. Please cure Dylan's wasp bites, too."

And finally: "St. Roch, I am a hopeless cause. Cure me!"

I imagine that St. Roch must be generous enough that he doesn't mind being confused with St. Jude, who is actually the saint in charge of hopeless causes. Not to mention that another petitioner has left an offering of a fava bean, which really belongs on a St. Joseph altar.

Off to the right of the altar is a tiny doorway, shaped like a gothic-style window, which leads to a small room. There is a locked gate across the doorway. Every other time I have come here, I've had to look through the gate, but on this particular visit to the shrine, I happened to run into Jack the caretaker, who unlocks the gate so I can go through the doorway. At last, I am entering the inner sanctum. Ducking my head to clear the low doorframe, I feel like Alice in Wonderland as she steps through the



looking glass. The room is so small, so close and so crowded, that I feel compelled to kneel on the floor, which is paved from wall to wall in dozens of small stone blocks, each engraved with the word "thanks" and the occasional "merci." I am kneeling in a pool of gratitude.

Scattered inside are the ex-votos that generations of petitioners have left behind as a tribute to St. Roch for curing their ailments. Antique leg braces with children's shoes still attached, the dusty leather straps crumbling with age, hang from hooks on the wall. A prosthetic leg with a wooden foot screwed onto the end. A pair of crutches leans in a corner. A set of false teeth. According to the custom of placing something that represents the part of the body that needed healing, there are plaster casts of a brain, an ear, arms, legs, a liver, a torso. These also hang on hooks. There are others, harder to interpret. Someone has left a lock of hair, a key on a ribbon, an old camera covered in gold sparkles. Against the window hangs a Plexiglas silhouette of a shapely female leg that could once have adorned a hosiery display at Krauss Department Store.

On a previous visit I looked through the locked gate to see a pile of baby-doll parts, pink plastic arms and legs with rolls of fake baby fat, sweet severed heads with blank blue eyes, all there to indicate the parts of real babies who needed St. Roch's help. Although I know these objects represent loving requests for a good cause, taken at a glance the scene is disturbing. At times it looks like a slaughterhouse in here. But then that is what makes this place so special — the desperation that makes allies of the macabre and the blessed.

Another item on St. Roch's resume is that he not only saves people from pestilence and plague, but he also helps those seeking relief from their loneliness. Legend has it that young women who want a husband can improve their chances if they make a pilgrimage to nine churches on Good Friday, culminating with a visit to St. Roch's shrine. Another version of the story is that these lonely women will get a husband if they pray a novena and walk nine times between the cemetery gate and the shrine with gravel in their shoes.

I visit St. Roch's shrine to remember the New Orleans I met years ago when I first arrived in my adopted city. Shabby, modest, populated by cockroaches and broken statues, so cherished and yet so neglected, this shrine is an extraordinary place where a magical transformation may occur, if you ask with humble intentions. It represents the qualities about New Orleans that move me most deeply. This is the end of the line, the place you come to when all other remedies have failed. Desperation brings you here to offer up your wish for relief from suffering. You offer it here because you are ready to relinquish control and cast your fate upon the mercy of some unseen intelligence that may or may not come through for you. You hope and trust that St. Roch will care. The bargain is easy. You must keep your promises and remember to say "thanks." **GW**

