

## Saint Donatus of Muenstereifel

St. Donatus of Muenstereifel is a lesser known saint in the Christian faith, but his name and image are revered in northwest Iowa. The original "prairie church" built by Luxembourg immigrants outside of Alton in 1881 was named St. Donatus, and there are at least three statues of the saint in the area, in Granville, Remsen, and Le Mars. The patron saint of protection against lightning and storms, St. Donatus is sometimes asked to intercede with God for protection during bad weather.

One story of the saint's protection tells of Father Heerde, who was celebrating Mass and benediction on June 30, 1652 when St. Martin's Church in Muenstereifel, Germany, was struck by lightning. The altar and the priest's vestments were set on fire. Father Heerde immediately prayed to St. Donatus, whose relics are still housed in the church, to intercede for Heerde's safety. The prayer to St. Donatus was effective, and the priest emerged from the fire unharmed.

Donatus was a Roman soldier in the 12th Legion Fulminatrix, or Thundering Legion, when his unit was surrounded and nearly overwhelmed during a battle in 173 A.D. Donatus led prayers of those troops who were Christian, asking to be saved from their opponents. Immediately, a thunderstorm erupted, saving the legionaries. When Donatus publicly gave thanks to God for saving them, he was martyred by the Romans.

The remains of St. Donatus were entombed in the Roman catacombs. Later, in 1646, his relics were removed and sent to the Jesuit church in Muenstereifel. Devotion to the saint grew both in Germany and in the "low countries" of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. His feast day is celebrated on August 7, but he is also venerated on June 30, the date of the Muenstereifel miracle.

When Luxembourg immigrants settled the area of Tetes de Mortes, Jackson County, Iowa, in the mid-1800s, they built a Catholic church. The Bishop of Dubuque requested a name

for the new parish, and settlers suggested the parish be dedicated to St. Mary. However, pointing out that there were already several churches of that name in the area, the Bishop asked the parishioners to choose a different name. Charles Hoffman, having heard that storms were frequent in the region, suggested the parish be named St. Donatus because of the saint's protection against lightning and storms. The church was dedicated, and the settlement near the Mississippi River also became known as St. Donatus.

In 1881, pioneers from St. Donatus who had settled in the Alton, IA area began building a church on the corner of what is now Kingbird Ave. and 480th St. Ironically, before the church could be completed, a windstorm destroyed the structure. After the church was rebuilt, it was dedicated to St. Donatus. It was torn down in 1886 and the lumber used to enlarge St. Mary's Church, Alton.

At least two churches in northwest Iowa still hold statues of St. Donatus: St. Joseph's Church in Granville and St. Mary's Church in Remsen. The plaster statue in St. Joseph's Church is placed on St. Joseph's altar, on the right side of the church, and depicts St. Donatus as a Roman soldier holding a wire in a zigzag lightning pattern. There are no records of the statue's acquisition, but it may have been installed at the same time as other statues when the current brick church was built in 1905.

St. Mary's Church is the site of a hand-carved, wooden statue created by Roger Winandy of Esch, Luxembourg. In about 2006, Winandy approached members of St. Mary's Parish to ask their help in locating a relative; as thanks when the relative was found buried in Holy Name Cemetery in Marcus, Winandy, a professional carver, used his skills to sculpt a statue of St. Donatus. Made of lime wood, the hand painted statue depicts Donatus as a Roman soldier wearing a cloak and carrying a furled banner and two wooden lightning bolts.

A third depiction of the saint can be found in Calvary Cemetery, Le Mars, located over the graves of Nicolas and Catharina Kellen. The couple were both born in Luxembourg, and their joint monument holds a tall statue labeled "St. Donatus." Interestingly, the figure, carved from stone, has no lightning bolts in his hands; instead, his right hand holds the hilt of a sheathed sword. Nicolas died in 1884.

The Luxembourg Heritage Society of Northwest Iowa will meet Saturday, January 11 at 9:30 a.m. in the meeting room of the Remsen Public Library. Work on Lux Fest preparations will continue; everyone is welcome to attend. Information on Lux Fest can be found on the Society's website, [nwialux.org](http://nwialux.org).