

Saints be praised: Honoring the pious pawn-pushers

This week, we observe what I've always thought of as the "Week of the Saints": St. Patrick's Day on March 17 and, two days later, St. Joseph's Day — an actual holiday at my parochial grade school because the nuns who taught us were from the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph.



To mark the occasion, we were all set to offer a game played

by a bona fide canonized saint, but it turns out a collection of supposed games and chess problems attributed to a young Fr. Karol Wojtyła — known to history as Pope St. John Paul II — shortly he was ordained in 1946 are almost certainly bogus. (It would not be the first time in history a saint's advertised relics turned out not to be the real deal.)

Fortunately, we can offer a nice game from a literal "saint" — France's Pierre Charles Fourmier de Saint Amant (1800-1872), the strongest player in the strongest chess-playing nation in the world in the 1830s and 1840s. Saint Amant is best known for two matches he played with English rival Howard Staunton in 1843, a casual six-game affair in London won by Saint Amant 3½-2½, and a more serious return match in Paris in December in which Staunton scored a decisive 13-8 victory in what is widely considered the first world championship match.

The December match — the winner was the first player to win 11 games — was a curious affair, with Staunton reeling off seven wins and a draw in the first eight games and threatening to wipe his opponent off the board. But as with Boris Spassky against Bobby Fischer nearly 130 years later, Saint Amant's play improved remarkably after the disastrous start. He won Game 9 and went 7½-5½ in the latter part of the match before the Englishman finally notched the deciding 11th win.



Saint Amant-Staunton
after 22...fxe3

Perhaps Saint Amant's best showing was Game 13, a very modern-looking Symmetrical Tarrasch QGD in which White nurses the advantage of the first move into a promising position after 14. Rcl Rc8 15. Rc2 Rc7 16. Rce2, beating Staunton to the punch for control of the central file.

After 17. h3 (Na4!? b5 18. Nc5 was also pleasant for White) Nd8 18. Qd2 b5 19. b4 Ne6 20. Bf5, Black lets his position's minor irritations — the pin on the knight and the pressure on the e-file — get to him, lashing out with 20...Ne4?! (Re8 21. Ne5 Rce7 was perfectly playable) 21. Nxe4 dxe4 22. d5! (Bxe4? Bxe4 23. Rxe4 Rc2, winning material, was perhaps Staunton's hope), opening lines to White's advantage.

A second defensive lapse leads to a powerfully played sacrificial conclusion by Saint Amant: 22...exf3? (see diagram; mandatory now was 22...Bf4!, keeping White's advantage to a minimum after 23. dxe6 Bxd2 24. exf7+ Rxf7 25. Bxc8 exf3 26. Rxd2 Bxc8 27. g4) 23. Rxe6!, the first of three hammer blows that drop Black to the canvas.

Gallic panache is on display in the finale: 23...Qd8 (fxc6 24. Bxe6+ Rff7 25. Bxc8 and wins) 24. Bf6! (putting a second piece *en prise* to bust up the kingside defense) gxf6 (Qd7 25. Bxg7!, when 25...Kxg7 26. Qh6+ Kh8 27. Qxh7 is mate) 25. Rxd6! (Tactics 101 — the White Queen, bishop and rook form an unstoppable mating trio) Kg7 (Qxd6 26. Qh6 Rd8 27. Qxh7+ Kf8 28. Qh8 mate) 26. Rxd8 27. Be4, and Saint Amant has won

a queen for a rook. Black could resign here but plays out a few more moves before bowing to the inevitable.

While they may not have officially earned the saint's halo, lower-ranked clergy of every faith have made their mark on the game, from Spain's Fr. Ruy Lopez de Segura in the 16th century to a slew of English chess-playing curates in the 19th century to America's Fr. Bill Lombardy in the mid-20th century. One of the strongest still playing today has to be Rabbi Danny Horwitz, who last year clinched his second USCF Absolute Correspondence Chess Championship in the past six years. You get a sense of the rabbi's skill in a nicely played postal game from 2015 against Croatian correspondence expert Zeljko Kuster.

It's a classic Sicilian Kan battle, with Horwitz as White building up a scary kingside advantage while Black seeks a timely counterpunch in the center and on the queenside. After some no doubt supersubtle finesses and pivots on both sides, Black seems to have achieved his goal on 30. Rff3 Ba4, when it appears White must divert time and resources to saving his buckling queenside.

But the rabbi's not for turning: 31. Nb3 Rac8 32. gxh6 gxh6 33. Qc1! Bxb3 34. Qxh6! (cxb3?! Nb5 35. Qxh6 Nxc3 36. Rxc3 Qxc3 37. Rxc3 Rxc3 38. Qd2 Rxb3 is fine for Black), letting the piece go to build up new mating threats against Black's cornered king. After 34...Nxc2 35. Bd2 Rxc3 (the threat was 36. Rxc3+ Rxc3 37. Bg5 f6 38. Bxf6+ Rg7 39. Rg3, winning) 36. Rxc3 f6 (on 36...Rg8, 37. Bg5 wins again) 37. Rxb3 Rg8 38. Rg3 Rxc3 39. Kxg3, material is once again equal, but White's two bishops and Black's shaky king give Horwitz a clear advantage.

White's nicely timed 46. Bb6 Nxb2 47. Qxg7+! leads to an ending where his far-ranging bishop overshadows Black's hobbled knight, while all of Black's remaining pawns are

on vulnerable dark squares (by such subtle gradations are many modern postal victories fashioned). A Black pawn falls on 47...Kxg7 48. Kxg2 Kh6 (Kf7 49. Kf3 Ke7 50. Be3 Nf8 51. Ke2 Kd7 52. Kd3 Kc6 53. Kc4 Nd7 54. h5 is just one line showing Kuster's difficulty covering all sides of the board) 49. Kh3 Nf8 50. Bc7, and after 61. Be7 Nd7 62. Kh3, Black's king must give way as any knight move loses another pawn.

In the final position (Kuster's last stand, as it were), the Black king's path up the h- and g-files is blocked and White can maneuver his king and bishop at leisure to infiltrate the defense and pick up another pawn; Black resigned.

Saint Amant-Staunton, Match, Game 13, Paris, December 1843

1. d4 e6 2. c4 d5 3. e3 Nf6 4. Nc3 c5 5. Nf3 Nc6 6. a3 Be7 7. Bd3 O-O 8. O-O b6 9. h3 Bb7 10. cxd5 exd5 11. Bb2 cxd4 12. exd4 d4d6 13. Re1 a6 14. Rc1 Rc8 15. Rc2 Rc7 16. Rce2 Qc8 17. h3 Nd8 18. Qd2 b5 19. b4 Ne6 20. Bf5 Ne4 21. Nxe4 dxe4 22. d5 exd3 23. Rxe6 Qd8 24. Bf6 gxf6 25. Rxf6 Kg7 26. Rxf8 Rxf8 27. Be4 f6g2 28. Qf4 Rc4 29. Qg4+ Kf8 30. Qh5 Ke7 31. d6+ Kxf6 32. Bxb7 Kc7 33. Bxa6 Rc3 34. Qxb5 Black resigns

Horwitz-Kuster, VW-Cup 8 Correspondence Tournament, 2015

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 a6 5. Nc3 Qc7 6. g3 Bb4 7. Bd2 Nf6 8. Bg2 Nc6 9. Nb3 O-O 10. O-O d6 11. f4 Bc3 12. Bxc3 e5 13. f5 a5 14. a4 b6 15. g4 h6 16. h4 Ba6 17. Rf2 Nh7 18. Be1 b5 19. Bd2 bxa4 20. Rxa4 Bb5 21. Ra3 a4 22. Nc1 Na5 23. Rg3 Nc4 24. Bc3 a3 25. bxa3 Rxa3 26. Nb3 Kh8 27. g5 Rg8 28. Kh2 Raa8 29. Nd2 Na3 30. Rff3 Ba4 31. Nb3 Rac8 32. gth6 gth6 33. Qc1 Bxb3 34. Qxh6 Nxc2 35. Bd2 Rxc3 36. Rxc3 f6 37. Rxb3 Rg8 38. Rg3 Rxc3 39. Kxg3 Qc4 40. Kh2 Qd4 41. Ba5 Ne3 42. Qh5 Qa7 43. Qe8+ Kg7 44. Qg6+ Kh8 45. Bd8 Qg7 46. Bb6 Nxc2 47. Qxg7+ Kxg7 48. Kxg2 Kh6 49. Kh3 Nf8 50. Bc7 Nd7 51. Bxf6 Kg7 52. Kg4 Kh7 53. Ba3 Kg7 54. Be7 Kh7 55. Bd8 Kg7 56. Ba5 Nc5 57. Kf3 Kh6 58. Bd2+ Kh5 59. Bb4 Nd7 60. Kg3 Nh6 61. Be7 Nd7 62. Kh3 Kh6 63. Kg4 Kh7 64. Ba3 Kg7 65. Bc1 Nb6 66. Kf3 Black resigns

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