

Saint Agatha

SAINT OF THE DAY

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The popular piety aroused by the martyrdom of Saint Agatha (c. 229-235, † 5 February 251), the Sicilian virgin who testified to her unshakeable faith in Christ during Decius' persecutions, spread quickly throughout Christendom. The ancient cult of Saint Agatha is attested by a couple of funerary inscriptions dating to the end of the 3rd century, one of which, found in Ustica, is about a woman called Lucifera, who had died on the Saint's birthday. Even more interesting, since it shows how this cult had already reached the East, is the testimony of Bishop Methodius of Olympus (c. 250-311), who in his *Symposium decem virginum*

presents Agatha as a model of Christian life. To further confirm the rapid spread of the Saint's popularity, Saint Lucy is said to have been in Catania as a pilgrim on 5th February 301 to pray on the tomb of Saint Agatha, who appeared to her and prophesied: "Just as Catania is protected by me, your Syracuse will be by you."

Educated as a Christian by a noble family of Catania, Agatha soon felt a desire to consecrate herself to Christ and, around the age of 15, she offered Him her virginity, receiving the veil from the bishop. When the persecutions of Decius (249-251) were at their height, the girl was arrested by the consular official Quintianus, who fell in love with her beauty and tried to bend her will. He entrusted her to the brothel-keeper Aphrodisias for 30 days, thinking Agatha could give in to the seductions of the world, but she was adamant in her resolution. She was then brought back to Quintianus who asked her why, a noble and free woman, she dressed like a slave. "The greatest freedom is in proving that one is the servant of Christ," replied Agatha, who then eloquently exposed the vanity of the gods that the proconsul commanded her to worship.

She was tortured. Her limbs were stretched on a rack, but rather than yielding, Agatha rejoiced "as one who sees the One who has long yearned for". Quintianus then ordered the ordeal reported by a number of sources and depicted in art: Agatha had her breasts pulled with tongs and torn off. She was then put back into prison, where at midnight Saint Peter appeared and healed her in the name of Christ. Four days later she was called back to the proconsul, who asked who had cured her: "Christ, the Son of God," Agatha explained. Blinded with anger, Quintianus subjected her to the torture of hot coals. This, however, was interrupted by an earthquake that caused the death of two of his advisors, while the rioting populace went up to the Praetorian palace, believing the quake was a divine sign. The proconsul fled, while ordering that Agatha be taken back to prison, where she begged the Lord to welcome her into His Kingdom. Shortly thereafter she exhaled her final breath.

Her veil, still intact while her body was turned over on the embers, was carried in procession the following year, to stop a flow of lava from Mount Etna, which, according to tradition, ceased on February 5th. Many similar wonders have been attributed over the centuries to the intercession of the Saint, and a relic is still kept in the cathedral of Catania. As evidence of the popularity of her cult, Agatha is among the seven ancient martyrs – together with Lucy, Agnes, Anastasia, Cecilia, Felicita and Perpetua – to be invoked in the Roman Canon.