Saint Alexander

The patron saint of Bergamo, Saint Alexander († c. 303), is traditionally considered the standard bearer of the Theban Legion and one of several Christian soldiers who suffered martyrdom during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian. The oldest *Passio* that has come to us about him dates back to about the 8th century. But his cult, testified by the churches that soon rose in his honour, has much earlier origins and was able to spread freely following the Pax Constantiniana. From Saint Eucherius of Lyon (380-450) we also know that the Theban Legion was composed of Christians under the

command of Saint Maurice and that it was decimated in the ancient *Agaunum* (present day Saint-Maurice, in Switzerland) after its soldiers had refused to sacrifice to pagan deities and exterminate populations that had converted to Christianity.

The hagiographic tradition relating to Alexander reports that the saint was among those who escaped this massacre, finding shelter with some companions in Italy. Here he was imprisoned in Milan in the Zebedeo Prison, where the church of Sant'Alessandro in Zebedia was built around the 5th century. He refused to abjure and managed to escape a first time, thanks to the help of Saint Fidelis of Como. He was then recaptured and brought back to Milan: in front of Maximian he knocked down the altar that had been erected to offer sacrifices to the idols, arousing the wrath of the Emperor of the West.

He was condemned to death by decapitation, but the hagiographer tells us that the executioner was unable to strike him because his arms stiffened at the sight of Alexander, who appeared to him "as large as a mountain". He was imprisoned again, this time condemned to die of hardships in prison. But he managed to escape again, taking refuge in Bergamo. Here he inspired several conversions to Christ, until he was captured for the last time by the imperial soldiers. His beheading was presumably carried out on 26 August 303. The basilica of Sant'Alessandro in Colonna was built on the site of his martyrdom.