

Saint Alexis

SAINT OF THE DAY

17_07_2021



Saint Alexis of Rome (4th-5th centuries) has been over the centuries a source of inspiration for men of letters and artists. Over time, various hagiographic versions of his figure have emerged, united by a fundamental trait: his renunciation of everything in order to follow God, obtaining the hundredfold promised by Jesus. His life is known through three traditions, one Syriac, one Greek and one Latin.

The Syriac version, dating back to the end of the 5th century, is the oldest. It tells

of a rich young man originally from Constantinople, the “New Rome”, who secretly boarded a ship the night before his wedding and reached Syria. That young man then continued on his way to Edessa (in what is now southern Turkey), a city with a large Christian community that for centuries guarded the Mandylion, a cloth bearing the Face of Jesus and identified by several scholars with the Shroud of Turin. There he lived begging for alms and in the evening he distributed to the poor what he had collected during the day, keeping for himself only the bare minimum to survive. Prayer and penance filled his days and because of his asceticism, the people called him Mar Riscia, that is “man of God”. After 17 years spent in Edessa, feeling close to the moment of death, he revealed that he belonged to a noble Roman family and had renounced marriage to consecrate himself to God. According to this ancient hagiography his death occurred while the Syrian writer Rabbula was Bishop of Edessa (c. 412-435).

Later the Greek tradition spread, according to which the young man was called Aléxios (Alexius) - a name meaning “defender”, “he who protects” - and was a native of Rome. After spending the central part of his life in Edessa, always as a beggar, Alexis returned to the Eternal City, living as a stranger in his father's cellar, until his death on July 17.

Finally, from the 10th century the Latin tradition is attested, rather similar to the Greek one and which from that time on has been the best known, to the point of being included in the *Golden Legend* of Blessed Jacobus de Varagine (1228-1298). According to Latin hagiography, Alexius was the son of Egle and Euphemianus, a very rich man, who had great pity for the poor, orphans and widows. This version reports that his betrothed was called Adriatica and the night before the wedding, when the young man left for Edessa, she had agreed to live in chastity. His father had his servants search in vain for him; they travelled as far as the city of Asia Minor but did not recognize him, as his appearance had changed so much due to his choice of poverty and self-denial. After 18 years in Edessa he returned to Rome and here he was welcomed with his father's usual benevolence. But not even his father recognized him. The saint was housed in a cellar of his father's house, where he lived the last 17 years of his earthly life.

When Alexius died, a voice was heard from heaven: “Seek the man of God, who prays for the city of Rome!”. And again: “Seek in the Aventine Hill, in the house of Euphemianus”. His father began the search and with him Innocent I (Pope from 401 to 417) and the emperor’s brothers Arcadius (†408) and Honorius (†423). In the end, they remembered the pilgrim in the cellar. Alexius was found holding in his hand a scroll revealing his identity.

On the Aventine stands the Basilica of Saints Boniface and Alexius, still chosen today for many weddings. It houses an ancient icon, known as Our Lady of the Intercession or of Saint Alexius, which according to tradition was brought by the saint from the East. Among the faithful of Rome who were devoted to him, we must remember a beloved soul who saw him appear in a dream during a difficult predicament: Saint Francesca Romana.

Patron of: beggars