

Saint Lea of Rome

SAINT OF THE DAY

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St Jerome's Letter XXIII offers us a splendid portrait of St Lea (†384), a Roman widow who left her wealth to follow the way of Christ becoming worthy of Paradise through prayer, penance and spiritual motherhood towards various virgins. Jerome's letter is addressed to Saint Marcella (c. 330-410) to console her for the earthly death of Lea (buried in Ostia), news of which reached the two holy friends while they were reading and studying Psalm 72 together. Marcella was also a Roman widow and noblewoman, who had formed a female community dedicated to asceticism and to whom Jerome

acted as spiritual father during her stay in Rome.

In his eulogy of Lea, Jerome writes that “we must all greet with joy the liberation of a soul that has crushed Satan underfoot and finally won for itself a crown of tranquillity”. The author of the *Vulgate* then lists some of the saint's virtues: “Who can sufficiently praise the conduct of our dear Lea's life? Her conversion to the Lord was so complete that, by becoming the head of a monastery, she showed herself as a true mother to the virgins in it”. Jerome informs us that Lea wore rough sackcloth, spent nights in prayer, fed on the poorest food and instructed her companions more by example than by words: “Her humility was so great that she, who had once been the mistress of many, had become the servant of all [...] a handmaid of Christ”.

Jerome draws a parallel with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, saying he was convinced that Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, a consul who tried to restore paganism and who also died in 384, “is now in Tartarus”, symbol of Hell. “As a reward for her brief toil, Lea enjoys eternal happiness, is welcome in the choir of angels, and is consoled in the bosom of Abraham. And, just as the beggar Lazarus once saw the rich man [...] lying in torment, so Lea now sees the consul [Praetextatus died before he could hold the office to which he had been elected, *ed.*], no longer in his triumphal robes but dressed in mourning”. In what sounds like a warning to convert, Jerome exhorts us not to trust in earthly glory: “What a vast change! A few days ago the highest dignitaries of the city walked before him as he ascended the ramparts of the Capitol like a general celebrating a triumph, with the Roman people jostling to welcome him and applaud him”.

Quite different is the eternal fate of Lea, who in the eyes of the world “seemed poor and of little worth, and whose life was considered madness”. Now she is in the presence of Christ and can sing Psalm 47, quoted by Jerome: “As we had heard, so we saw in the city of the Lord”. The saint concludes with another teaching with strong Gospel references: “We must not seek to possess both Christ and the world. No. Eternal things must take the place of ephemeral things [...], if we aspire to immortality we must realise that we are but mortal”. As Saint Lea understood.

Read more: See [Letter XXIII](#) of Saint Jerome to Saint Marcella