

Saint Agatha, Virgin and Martyr

February 5

From: *Butler's Lives of the Saints*

The cities of Palermo and Catania in Sicily dispute the honor of St. Agatha's birth, but it is agreed that she received the crown of martyrdom at Catania. Her "acts," with which many variations exist in both Latin and Greek, but which are of no historical value, state that she belonged to a rich and illustrious family and having been consecrated to God from her earliest years, she triumphed over many assaults upon her purity. Quintian, a man of consular dignity, thought he could carry out his evil designs upon Agatha by means of the emperor's edict against Christians. He therefore had her brought before him. Seeing herself in the hands of her persecutors she prayed, "Jesus Christ, Lord of all, thou seest my heart, thou knowest my desire. Do thou alone possess all that I am. I am thy sheep. Make me worthy to overcome the Devil." Quintian ordered her to be handed over to Aphrodisia, a most wicked woman who with her six daughters kept a house of ill-fame. In this dreadful place Agatha suffered assaults and stratagems upon her honor more terrible than torture or death, but she stood firm. After a month Quintian tried to frighten her with threats, but she remained undaunted and declared that to be a servant of Jesus Christ was to be truly at liberty. The judge, offended at her resolute answers, commanded her to be beaten and taken to prison. The next day she underwent another examination, and she asserted that Jesus Christ was her light and salvation. Quintian then ordered her to be stretched on the rack, a torment generally accompanied by stripes, the tearing of the sides with iron hooks, and by burning with blazing torches. The governor, enraged at seeing her suffer all this with cheerfulness, ordered her breasts to be cruelly crushed and then cut off. Afterwards he remanded her to prison, enjoining that neither food nor medical care should be supplied to her. But God gave her comfort: she had a vision of St. Peter who filled her dungeon with a heavenly light, and who consoled and healed her. Four days later Quintian caused her to be rolled naked over live coals mixed with broken potsherds. As she was carried back to prison, she prayed, "Lord, my Creator, thou hast always protected me from the cradle. Thou hast taken me from the love of the world and given me patience to suffer. Receive now my soul." After saying these words, she breathed out her life.

There is good evidence of the early *cultus* of St. Agatha. Her name occurs in the Calendar of Carthage (c. 530) and in the "Hieronymianum," and her praises were sung by Venantius Fortunatus (*Carmina*, viii, 4), but we can affirm nothing with confidence concerning her history. She is depicted in the procession of the saints at Sant' Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna. As an attribute in art, her breasts, which were cut off, are often shown on a dish. These in the middle ages were often mistaken for bread on St. Agatha's feast which is brought on a dish to the altar. As in Sicily she was credited with the power of arresting the eruptions of Mount Etna, so she is invoked against any outbreak of fire. Whether because the warning of a fire was given by a bell, or because the molten metal in the casting of a bell resembles a stream of lava, the guilds of bell-founders took St. Agatha for their patroness. Two sixth-century churches in Rome were dedicated in her honor, and she is named in the canon of the Mass.

From *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, complete edition, volume one, pp. 255-256.