



December 13
Commemoration: Lucy, martyr, 304

Saint Lucy (283–304), also known as Saint Lucia, was a wealthy young Christian martyr who is venerated as a saint by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Orthodox Christians. Her feast day in the West is 13 December; with a name derived from *lux*, *lucis* "light", she is the patron saint of those who are blind. Saint Lucy is one of the very few saints celebrated by members of the Lutheran Church among the Scandinavian peoples, who take part in Saint Lucy's Day celebrations that retain many elements of Germanic paganism. Saint Lucy is one of seven women, aside from the Blessed Virgin Mary, commemorated by name in the Canon of the Mass. Hagiography tells us that Lucy was a Christian during the Diocletian persecution. She consecrated her virginity to God, refused to marry a pagan, and had her dowry distributed to the poor. Her would-be husband denounced her as a Christian to the governor of Syracuse, Sicily. Miraculously unable to move her or burn her, the guards took out her eyes with a fork. In another version, Lucy's would-be husband admired her eyes, so she tore them out and gave them to him, saying, "Now let me live to God".

The oldest record of her story comes from the fifth-century accounts of saints' lives. By the 6th century, her story was widespread, so that she appears in the Sacramentary of Pope Gregory I. At the opening of the 8th century Aldhelm included a brief account of her life among the virgins praised in *De laude virginittatis*, and in the following century the Venerable Bede included her in his Martyrology. In medieval accounts, Saint Lucy's eyes are gouged out prior to her execution. In art, her eyes sometimes appear on a tray that she is holding.

Until 1861 relics of Saint Lucy were venerated in a church dedicated to her in Venice; after its demolition, they were transferred to the church of San Geremia.

Because people wanted to shed light on Lucy's bravery and fortitude, legends grew up, reported in the *acta* that are associated with her name. All the details are conventional ones also associated with other female martyrs of the early 4th century. Her Roman father died when she was young, leaving her and her mother without a protecting guardian. Her mother, Eutychia, had suffered four years with dysentery but Lucy had heard the renown of Saint Agatha, the patroness of Catania, "and when they were at a Mass, one read a gospel that made mention of a woman who was healed of the dysentery by touching of the hem of the coat of Jesus Christ," which, according to the *Legenda Aurea*, convinced her mother to pray together at Saint Agatha's tomb. They stayed up all night praying, until they fell asleep, exhausted. Saint Agatha appeared in a vision to Lucy and said, "Soon you shall be the glory of Syracuse, as I am of Catania." At that instant Eutychia was cured.

Eutychia had arranged a marriage for Lucy with a pagan bridegroom, but Lucy urged that the dowry be spent on alms so that she might retain her virginity. Eutychia suggested that the sums would make a good bequest, but Lucy countered, "...whatever you give away at death for the Lord's sake you give because you cannot take it with you. Give now to the true Savior, while you are healthy, whatever you intended to give away at your death." News that the patrimony and jewels were being distributed came to the ears of Lucy's betrothed, who heard from a chattering nurse that Lucy had found a nobler Bridegroom.

Her rejected pagan bridegroom denounced Lucy as a Christian to the magistrate Paschasius, who ordered her to burn a sacrifice to the emperor's image. Lucy replied that she had given all that she had: "I offer to Him myself, let Him do with His offering as it pleases Him." Sentenced to be defiled in a brothel, Lucy asserted:

"No one's body is polluted so as to endanger the soul if it has not pleased the mind. If you were to lift my hand to your idol and so make me offer against my will, I would still be guiltless in the sight of the true God, who judges according to the will and knows all things. If now, against my will, you cause me to be polluted, a twofold purity

will be gloriously imputed to me. You cannot bend my will to your purpose; whatever you do to my body, that cannot happen to me.”

The Christian tradition states that when the guards came to take her away they found her so filled with the Holy Spirit that she was as stiff and heavy as a mountain; they could not move her even when they hitched her to a team of oxen. Even after implanting a dagger through her throat she prophesied against her persecutor. Unfounded, and absent in the many narratives and traditions, at least until the 15th century, is the story of Lucia tortured by eye-gouging. The emblem of the eyes on the cup, or plate, must be linked simply to popular devotion to her, as protector of sight, because of her name, Lucia (from the latin word "lux" which means "light"). In paintings St. Lucy is frequently shown holding her eyes on a golden plate.

Dante also mentions Lucia in *Inferno* Canto II as the messenger "of all cruelty the foe" sent to Beatrice from "The blessed Dame" (Divine Mercy), to rouse Beatrice to send Virgil to Dante's aid. She has instructed Virgil to guide Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Lucia is only referenced indirectly in Virgil's discourse within the narrative and doesn't appear. According to Robert Harrison, Professor in Italian Literature at Stanford University and Rachel Jacoff, Professor of Italian Studies at Wellesley, Lucia's appearance in this intermediary role is to reinforce the scene in which Virgil attempts to fortify Dante's courage to begin the journey through the *Inferno*.

Lucy may also be seen as a figure of Illuminating Grace or Mercy or even Justice. Nonetheless Dante obviously regarded Lucia with great reverence, placing her opposite Adam within the Mystic Rose in Canto XXXII of the *Paradiso*.

In Mark Musa's translation of Dante's *Purgatorio*, it is noted that Lucy was admired by an undesirable suitor for her beautiful eyes. To stay chaste she plucked out her own eyes, a great sacrifice for which God gave her a pair of even more beautiful eyes. It is said in Sweden that to vividly celebrate St. Lucy's Day will help one live the long winter days with enough light.

Lucy's name also played a large part in naming Lucy as a patron saint of the blind and those with eye-trouble. She was the patroness of Syracuse in Sicily, Italy.

Painting by Domenico Beccafumi (1484–1551). Date: 1521.