

Readings: 2 Corinthians 10:17 – 11:2; Psalm 30 (31) 3,4,6 – 8, 16,17; Matthew 25: 1 – 13.

Today we celebrate another of the virgin martyrs of the first three centuries of the Church's life.

Saint Lucy died during the last and greatest of the waves of persecution, under the Roman emperor Diocletian.

All we know of her for certain is that she died in or near AD 304, at Syracuse in Sicily, and that she was venerated as a martyr during the following century. A fourth century inscription records the death of a girl on Lucy's feast day. Her veneration spread widely and rapidly and is recorded in liturgical books of both Western and Eastern Churches. Churches were dedicated to her in many places, including Rome, Naples, Venice and Shropshire in England

But legend has – as so often with the martyrs of the early centuries of the Church's life – made up for ignorance of detailed facts. These details first appear in a fifth century *Acts of the Martyrs*.

She is said to have been born into a noble family and brought up as a Christian. During the Diocletian persecution she was denounced as a Christian either by a rejected suitor or by a man who tried to rape her. She was arrested, and when she refused to offer sacrifice to a Roman god she was tried and put to death. Some versions of the legend say that her eyes were torn out and miraculously restored before her burial, and she is sometimes shown holding them on a dish.

The fact that her name (*Lucia*) has links with the Latin word for light (*Lux*) probably accounts for this detail in her legend and for her being regarded as the patron saint of those suffering from eye troubles. It certainly accounts for ceremonies of light on her feast-day, (which before calendar reforms was the winter solstice – the shortest day of the year). In Sweden a ceremony is held in which girls in white wearing crowns of lighted candles make a procession in her honour.

Lucy's body remained in Syracuse for four hundred years and was then moved around many churches. After the crusaders' sack of Constantinople in 1204 some of her relics were taken to Venice, where a church was dedicated to her. This church was demolished in 1861 to make room for the Venice railway station (now called *Santa Lucia*), and her relics were moved to the nearby church of San Geremia, where they are still venerated.