

Readings: *1 Corinthians 1: 26 – 31; Psalm 30 (31); Luke 9: 23 – 26.*

Agatha is one of the many virgin martyrs whose veneration in the early days of the Church is well established. Pope Damasus (AD 366 – 384) composed a hymn in her honour; she is included in the Martyrology of Saint Jerome (died in AD 420); her name appears in the ancient canon of the Latin mass, which reached its settled form by the sixth century, and she is one of the procession of virgin martyrs depicted in the sixth century mosaics of the basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.

But, despite this obviously early veneration, we know very little for certain about her – not even the year of her martyrdom, which may have been as early as the early third century.

The *Acts* of her Passion and Death say that she was a wealthy young woman of Catania, on the East coast of Sicily. She had dedicated her virginity to Christ, but the Roman governor wished to marry her. When she refused, he used an imperial decree condemning Christians to force her consent. He first placed her in a brothel, and when this failed to persuade her, he ordered her to be tortured in a series of horrifying ways, including the cutting off of her breasts. She died in prison as a result of her sufferings.

Her tomb and principal shrine are in Catania, where a three-day festival, including a procession, leads up to today's feast.

She is invoked against the dangers of fire – especially the eruption of Mount Etna. – and against diseases of the breast.

Saint Agatha – like her fellow virgin-martyrs Agnes, Cecilia and Lucy – reminds us of the dignity ascribed by Christians in the early centuries to the preservation of virginity as in itself a public witness to Christian faith.

It is that – rather than the gruesome details of their martyrdoms – which merits our thanksgiving and praise. In the words of one of the Eucharistic Prefaces, God uses their example to *call human nature back to its original holiness.*