

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Agatha of Catania

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: February 5

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IN BRIEF

Saint Agatha of Catania

Sicilian virgin and martyr who died in 251, patron saint of Catania and Malta, invoked against fire and for diseases of the breast.

Feast day	February 5
Born	around 230, Catania (Sicily), according to tradition
Died	February 5, 251, Catania (Sicily)
Canonized	Pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	Catania, Malta, nursing mothers, wet nurses, breast cancer patients, bell founders, firefighters, against fire, against volcanic eruptions

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Agatha of Catania

Saint Agatha was a young Christian woman of Catania, in Sicily, martyred on February 5, 251, during the persecution of Emperor Decius, for refusing to deny Christ and to give in to the Roman governor. Her name appears in the first Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass, the Roman Canon, alongside the earliest women martyrs. Patron saint of Catania and Malta, invoked against fire, eruptions of Mount Etna and diseases of the breast, she is celebrated on February 5.

Who was Saint Agatha?

Agatha was born in the early third century in Sicily, at Catania according to the most widespread tradition (Palermo also claims her), into a noble Christian family. While still very young, she consecrated her virginity to Christ. Her name comes from the Greek *agathe*, "good." The accounts of her passion, written later, are not entirely reliable in their details, but her martyrdom at Catania and her cult, attested from the first centuries, are well established.

Key dates

- **c. 230**: Born in Sicily, at Catania according to tradition.
- **250**: Emperor Decius orders all inhabitants of the Empire to sacrifice to the gods.
- **February 5, 251**: Dies in prison at Catania after being tortured.
- **252**: According to tradition, her veil stops a lava flow from Etna at the gates of Catania.
- **c. 592**: Pope Gregory the Great rededicates an Arian church in Rome to her: Sant'Agata dei Goti.

- **1040**: Her relics are taken to Constantinople by the Byzantine general George Maniakes.
- **August 17, 1126**: Two soldiers, Gisliberto and Goselmo, bring her relics back to Catania.
- **1376**: The Sienese goldsmith Giovanni di Bartolo makes the reliquary bust still carried in procession.

The martyrdom of Agatha

The governor of Sicily, Quintianus, wanted to force Agatha to give up her faith and marry him. When she refused, he handed her over for a month to a woman of ill repute, Aphrodisia, charged with corrupting her, without success. He then had her tortured: according to tradition, her breasts were cut off. That night, in prison, the apostle Saint Peter appeared to her and healed her. The next day, Quintianus had her rolled over burning coals. An earthquake shook the city; taken back to her cell, Agatha died in prayer on February 5, 251.

This is why artists show her holding a plate bearing her two breasts, with the martyr's palm. These images made her the patron saint of nursing mothers, wet nurses and people with breast disease. The breasts on a plate were also taken for bells, which made her the patron of bell founders.



Saint Agatha, by Francisco de Zurbarán (around 1630-1633, Musée Fabre, Montpellier).

Protector of Catania and Mount Etna

A year after her death, in 252, Etna erupted and lava threatened Catania. According to tradition, the people took the veil that covered Agatha's tomb and carried it toward the flow, which stopped. Since then the veil has been kept as a major relic, and the people of Catania call on her at every eruption or earthquake. Agatha thus became the patron saint of firefighters and a protector against fire.

Every year, from February 3 to 5, Catania honors its patron with one of the largest religious festivals in the world. Hundreds of thousands of faithful follow her reliquary bust, carried on a silver carriage pulled by devotees dressed in white tunics, through the streets of the city. A second feast, on August 17, recalls the return of her relics in 1126.



The feast of Saint Agatha in Catania, in February.

Why do Catholics pray to Saint Agatha?

Saint Agatha is an example of inner freedom: a young woman alone before power, who yields neither to threats nor to violence. She is a reminder of the dignity of women's bodies and of the strength of faith in the midst of suffering. Today people pray to her for women with breast cancer, for nursing mothers, for victims of violence, and against fires and natural disasters.

Where to pray to Saint Agatha

- **Catania** (Sicily): Saint Agatha's Cathedral, which keeps her relics and her veil.
- **Rome**: the church of Sant'Agata dei Goti, one of the oldest churches dedicated to her.

- **Malta**: Saint Agatha's Crypt in Rabat, where Maltese tradition says she hid during the persecution.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Agatha or follow the novena to Saint Agatha, from January 27 to February 4.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Agatha

About this prayer

Saint Agatha has been prayed to since the third century, first in Catania and then throughout the Church, where her name is said in the Roman Canon of the Mass. People turn to her in illness, especially diseases of the breast, and in the dangers of fire and nature. The text below is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by her martyrdom and by the trust the faithful place in her.

Prayer to Saint Agatha

Saint Agatha, virgin and martyr,
you kept your faith and your freedom
in the face of threats and violence:
I come to you with confidence.

You knew suffering in your body
and were comforted by the Lord in your prison:
watch over the sick,
especially women living with breast cancer.
Obtain for them courage during treatment,
gentleness from those who care for them
and, if God wills, healing.

Protect nursing mothers and their babies.
Keep our homes from fire,
our cities from disaster,
and all who fight fires.

Today I entrust to you this intention: (name your intention).
Present it to Christ, your Bridegroom, for whom you gave your life.
Saint Agatha, pray for us. Amen.

Original text by Saintspedia.

A short prayer for someone who is sick

Saint Agatha, I entrust to you (name), who is ill. Support them in this trial, give them peace and strength, and stay close to those around them. Amen.

Original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

You can pray to Saint Agatha at any time, especially on February 5, her feast day, before a medical test, surgery or treatment, and in October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Agatha and read the life of Saint Agatha.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Agatha

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what tradition tells of Saint Agatha, virgin and martyr of Catania. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on January 27; it ends on February 4, before the feast on February 5. It can also be prayed at any time, especially for someone who is sick.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into the day. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

Day 1: A life given to Christ

While still young, Agatha consecrated her life to Christ. Her name means "good": her goodness comes from God, to whom she belongs entirely.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust my intention to you for these nine days. Let my life belong to you more and more.

Act of the day: Offer your day to God as soon as you wake up.

Day 2: Free before power

The governor Quintianus wanted to subdue her. Agatha was impressed neither by his rank nor by his threats.

Prayer: Saint Agatha, give me an inner freedom that nothing can buy.

Act of the day: Gently say no to a pressure that draws you away from what is good.

Day 3: Pure in the midst of evil

Handed over to a house of ill repute, Agatha stayed faithful. She kept her heart and body for God.

Prayer: Lord, keep my heart pure and help me respect the bodies of others as my own.

Act of the day: Pray for victims of prostitution and human trafficking.

Day 4: Suffering in the body

Agatha was tortured and mutilated. She bore in her flesh the violence of men without denying her faith.

Prayer: Saint Agatha, support all who suffer in their bodies, especially women living with breast cancer.

Act of the day: Check in on someone who is ill.

Day 5: Comfort in the night

In prison, at night, Saint Peter appeared to her and healed her. God does not abandon those who suffer.

Prayer: Lord, come and comfort those spending a night of anguish in hospital or at home.

Act of the day: Pray for nurses and doctors who work at night.

Day 6: For mothers and children

Patron of wet nurses and nursing mothers, Agatha watches over mothers and little ones.

Prayer: Saint Agatha, protect mothers, newborns and women who are expecting a child.

Act of the day: Give practical help to a young mother you know.

Day 7: Against fire

A year after her death, her veil stopped the lava of Etna at the gates of Catania. Since then she has been invoked against fire.

Prayer: Saint Agatha, protect our homes from fire, and keep firefighters and rescuers safe.

Act of the day: Pray for the victims of a recent fire or disaster.

Day 8: Faithful unto death

Rolled over burning coals, Agatha died in prison, giving her soul back to God.

Prayer: Lord, help me stay faithful to the end, in small trials and great ones.

Act of the day: Pray the Our Father slowly, pausing on "thy will be done."

Day 9: A saint of the whole Church

Agatha's name is spoken at Mass with those of the first martyrs. Her faithfulness still bears fruit throughout the Church.

Prayer: Saint Agatha, present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you, and obtain for me peace of heart. Amen.

Act of the day: If you can, go to Mass on February 5, or pray the prayer to Saint Agatha again.

PILGRIMAGE

Saint Agatha's Cathedral in Catania, Relics of Saint Agatha

Saint Agatha's Cathedral in Catania, Sicily, is the heart of the cult of the city's patron saint. It keeps her relics, her veil and the famous silver reliquary bust carried in procession every year during the feast of February 3 to 5, one of the largest religious festivals in the world.



Saint Agatha's Cathedral, on Piazza del Duomo in Catania.

A cathedral rebuilt several times

The first cathedral was built at the end of the eleventh century by the Norman Count Roger I of Sicily, over Roman baths. It was badly damaged by the earthquake of 1169, then almost entirely destroyed by the earthquake of 1693,

which devastated Catania. Only the Norman apse, in lava stone, survives from the medieval building. The present cathedral was rebuilt in the eighteenth century; its Baroque facade is the work of the architect Giovanni Battista Vaccarini.

The relics and veil of Saint Agatha

Taken to Constantinople in 1040 by the Byzantine general George Maniakes, Agatha's relics returned to Catania on August 17, 1126, brought back by two soldiers, Gisliberto and Goselmo. They are kept in the chapel of Saint Agatha, to the right of the choir, behind a gate. The skull and part of the chest rest in a silver reliquary bust made in 1376 by the Sienese goldsmith Giovanni di Bartolo, adorned with jewels given over the centuries. The other relics and the veil are kept in a silver chest. They are displayed only on a few dates each year.

The feast of Saint Agatha

From February 3 to 5, the whole city gathers around its patron. The bust and the chest are placed on a silver carriage, the *fercolo*, pulled by thousands of devotees in white tunics and black caps, waving white handkerchiefs. The procession winds through the city for two days, sometimes until dawn, amid an immense crowd. A second feast, on August 17, celebrates the return of the relics.



The reliquary bust of Saint Agatha, by Giovanni di Bartolo (1376).

What to see

- **The chapel of Saint Agatha**, with the tomb of the viceroy Fernando de Acuña and the gate protecting the relics.
- **The tomb of Vincenzo Bellini**, the composer born in Catania, author of *Norma*.
- **The Norman apses**, in lava stone, visible at the back of the building.
- **Piazza del Duomo**, with the Elephant Fountain, the symbol of Catania.

Practical tips

- **Getting there**: the cathedral stands on Piazza del Duomo, in the historic center, a few minutes' walk from the port. Catania airport is about 5 km (3 miles) away.

- **Visiting**: admission to the cathedral is free; the relic chapel is often closed by a gate but can be seen.
- **During the feast**: book accommodation well in advance and expect very dense crowds.
- **Dress**: shoulders and knees covered.

Praying to Saint Agatha

Before or after your visit, you can say the prayer to Saint Agatha or follow the novena to Saint Agatha. To get to know her better, read the life of Saint Agatha.

Credits and sources

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