

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Lucy of Syracuse

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint Lucy of Syracuse

Virgin and martyr of Syracuse under Diocletian, invoked for the light of the eyes.

Feast day	December 13
Born	late 3rd century, Syracuse, Sicily
Died	c. 304, Syracuse, Sicily
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since the 4th century)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	the blind, people with eye diseases, Syracuse

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Lucy

Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Syracuse

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Lucy of Syracuse

Saint Lucy was a young Christian of Syracuse, in Sicily, who died a martyr around 304, during the great persecution of Emperor Diocletian. Her name, which evokes light (*lux* in Latin), and her feast in the heart of winter have made her one of the most popular saints in Europe, from Sicily to Sweden. Named in the oldest Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Church and invoked for the eyes, she is celebrated on December 13.

Who was Saint Lucy?

Of Lucy's life, history holds with certainty only the essentials: a Christian woman of Syracuse gave her life for Christ at the beginning of the 4th century, and her memory was honored very early in her city. A Greek funerary inscription discovered in the late 19th century in the catacombs of Syracuse, that of a certain Euskia who died "on the feast of my lady Lucy," shows that her feast was already celebrated around the year 400. By the 6th century her name appeared in the Canon of the Roman Mass, alongside Agatha, Agnes and Cecilia.

The detailed account of her life comes from a *Passion* written later, probably in the 5th or 6th century, whose episodes belong partly to tradition and legend. They are presented here as such: they tell us less about the facts than about what the first Christians admired in her.

Key dates in the life of Saint Lucy

- **Late 3rd century**: Born in Syracuse to a wealthy family, according to tradition.
- **303**: Beginning of Diocletian's great persecution of Christians.
- **Around 304**: Martyrdom in Syracuse, traditionally dated December 13.

- **Around 400**: The Euskia inscription shows that her feast is celebrated in Syracuse.
- **6th century**: Her name is included in the Roman Canon of the Mass.
- **1039**: According to tradition, the Byzantine general George Maniakes has her body taken to Constantinople.
- **1204**: After the capture of Constantinople, the Venetians bring her relics to Venice.
- **1863**: The relics are moved to the Church of San Geremia, after the old Church of Saint Lucy was demolished to build the railway station.

The story of her Passion

According to the *Passion*, Lucy was engaged by her mother, Eutychia, to a young pagan. But she had already resolved to consecrate her virginity to Christ. Her mother had suffered for years from hemorrhages, and Lucy persuaded her to go with her to Catania, to the tomb of Saint Agatha, martyred half a century earlier. While they prayed, Agatha appeared to Lucy in a dream, announced her mother's healing and foretold that Lucy would be the glory of Syracuse as Agatha was the glory of Catania.

Back home, her healed mother agreed to let her daughter give her dowry to the poor. The rejected suitor denounced her as a Christian to the governor Paschasius. Lucy refused to sacrifice to the gods. The account relates that they tried to drag her by force to a brothel, but no team of oxen could move her, and then that the fire lit around her did not consume her. She finally died from a sword thrust to the throat, after receiving, it is said, Holy Communion.



Saint Lucy before the judge Paschasius, by Lorenzo Lotto (1532, Jesi).

Why is Saint Lucy shown with eyes on a plate?

The oldest images show Lucy, like other virgin martyrs, with a palm and a lamp. From the late Middle Ages, painters gave her a new attribute: two eyes resting on a dish or plate, as in the portrait by Zurbarán. This image does not come from the ancient *Passion*. It is explained first by her name, linked to light, and by popular devotion, which called on her for diseases of the eyes. A late legend, created afterward to explain the attribute, says she tore out her own eyes to discourage a suitor; it has no ancient basis.

For Christians, these eyes speak above all of the light of faith, which allows us to see beyond appearances. Dante, who was deeply attached to Saint Lucy, made her in the *Divine Comedy* a messenger of the Virgin Mary, sent to rescue the poet lost in the dark wood.



The Burial of Saint Lucy, painted by Caravaggio in Syracuse in 1608.

A saint of light in the heart of winter

Before the calendar reform of 1582, December 13 fell very close to the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. An old English rhyme remembers it: "Lucy light, Lucy light, shortest day and longest night." This coincidence made Lucy the saint who announces the return of light, in the middle of Advent.

In Sweden and the other Nordic countries, on the morning of December 13, a girl dressed in white with a crown of candles on her head leads processions of songs and saffron buns. Several regions of northern Italy, such as Bergamo, Brescia and Verona, tell children that Lucy brings them gifts during the night of December 12. In Syracuse, her silver statue is carried in procession from the cathedral to the place of her martyrdom.

Why is Saint Lucy the patron saint of the blind?

Lucy is the patron of the blind and of people with eye diseases because of her name, which means light, and because of the long popular devotion that turned to her for sight, later expressed in art by the eyes on a plate. Her protection is not only for the body: she is also invoked by those who seek the inner light of faith.

Lucy is a martyr of faithfulness: young, rich and promised in an advantageous marriage, she chose to give her goods to the poor and her life to Christ. Her example speaks to those who must hold firm in their convictions, and her light to those going through a night, physical or spiritual. She is invoked for diseases of the eyes, for the blind and visually impaired, and for keeping a pure gaze.

To pray with her, use the prayer to Saint Lucy, or follow the novena to Saint Lucy, beginning on December 4 and ending on December 12, the eve of her feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Lucy in art

- **Two eyes on a plate or dish**, her most famous attribute since the late Middle Ages.
- **A lamp or candle**, sign of the light her name evokes.
- **The martyr's palm.**
- **A sword or a wound at the throat**, recalling her death.
- **A crown of candles**, in the Scandinavian tradition.

Where to pray to Saint Lucy

- **Syracuse** (Sicily): the Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, built on the place of her martyrdom and burial, above the catacombs.
- **Syracuse**: the cathedral, which keeps the silver statue carried in procession on December 13.

- **Venice**: the Church of San Geremia, near the Santa Lucia railway station, which holds her body.
- **Catania**: the Cathedral of Saint Agatha, recalling the pilgrimage of Lucy and her mother.



The relics of Saint Lucy in the Church of San Geremia, Venice.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Lucy for the Light of the Eyes and Heart

There is no prayer written by Saint Lucy: what we know of her comes from the devotion paid to her memory since the 4th century. The oldest prayer in which her name is spoken is the Roman Canon of the Mass, which still invokes her today. Below you will find that passage, a verse of Scripture to meditate on and an original prayer to Saint Lucy for the light of the eyes and of the heart.

Saint Lucy in the Roman Canon

After the consecration, the First Eucharistic Prayer, known as the Roman Canon, asks God to welcome the faithful into the company of the saints. It then names seven women martyrs, Lucy among them. Translation from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *To us also, your sinful servants, who hope in your abundant mercy, be pleased to grant some share and fellowship with your holy apostles and martyrs: with John, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia and all your saints.*
>
> *Admit us, we pray, into their company, not weighing our merits, but granting us your pardon.*

Source: Roman Canon of the Mass (*Nobis quoque peccatoribus*), whose list of saints was fixed by the 6th century at the latest; today the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Missal.

A verse of Scripture to meditate on

> *"The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light."*

Source: Gospel according to Matthew 6:22, translation by Saintspedia. This verse suits the one who is invoked for the eyes and whose name speaks of light.

Prayer to Saint Lucy for the light of the eyes and of the heart

> *Saint Lucy, your name speaks of light, and you preferred Christ to all the promises of this world: pray for me.*
>
> *Guard my eyes, the eyes of the body and the eyes of the heart. I entrust to you those who are losing their sight, those who live in darkness, those waiting for surgery or a diagnosis, and all who care for them.*
>
> *You shared your goods with the poor of Syracuse: teach me to look at others with kindness, and to see the one who lacks everything and whom I fail to notice.*
>
> *In my nights, when I can no longer see the way, remind me that the light of Christ never goes out. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).*
>
> *Obtain for me a pure gaze, a firm faith and a faithful heart, so that one day I may see God face to face. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Lucy is celebrated on December 13, in the middle of Advent. Pray to her for someone with an eye disease, before eye surgery, for the blind and visually impaired, or during a dark period of your life. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Lucy from December 4 to December 12.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Lucy

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Lucy and the season of Advent. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on December 4; it ends on December 12, the day before her feast on December 13.

How to pray this novena

Each day, light a candle if you can, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. In a home with children, the candle and the short readings can become a simple family prayer during Advent.



Saint Lucy, by Francisco de Zurbarán (around 1625-1630, National Gallery of Art, Washington).

Day 1: A light in the night

Lucy's feast falls when the nights are longest. It reminds us that the light of Christ comes precisely where it is dark. We do not have to wait until everything is clear in our lives to welcome him.

Prayer: Lord, you know the shadows in my life. Let your light enter them, through the intercession of Saint Lucy.

Today: Light a candle and pray for a few minutes in silence before it, offering God the darkest corner of your life.

Day 2: Praying for a mother

According to tradition, Lucy took her sick mother to the tomb of Saint Agatha and prayed for her healing. Lucy's faith began with love for her own family. Holiness is not far from home: it starts with those closest to us.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you my parents and those who gave me life. Heal what is wounded in them and between us.

Today: Call or visit a parent, or pray for a parent who has died.

Day 3: The friendship of the saints

Lucy prayed to Agatha, the martyr of Catania, and felt supported by her. The saints are not distant models: they walk with us. The communion of saints is a family where the living and the dead help one another.

Prayer: Saint Lucy and Saint Agatha, pray for me. Teach me to rely on the communion of saints.

Today: Read the life of a saint you know little about.

Day 4: Giving away her goods

Lucy gave the poor the dowry that was meant for her. She did not keep for later what could help today. Her generosity was not a vague intention but a concrete decision.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to what I own. Make me generous without delay.

Today: Make a concrete gift, of money, time or goods, to a person in need or to a charity, without waiting for a better moment.

Day 5: A pure gaze

Lucy is shown with her eyes on a plate: a sign of the inner light that allows us to see others as God sees them. What we look at shapes what we become.

Prayer: Lord, purify my gaze. May I look at others not with envy, contempt or lust, but with kindness.

Today: Give up for one day a screen or an image that clutters your heart.

Day 6: Those who can no longer see

For centuries, people with diseases of the eyes have turned to Saint Lucy. Praying for them also means learning to draw near to them, to their fears and their daily difficulties.

Prayer: Saint Lucy, I entrust to you the blind, the visually impaired and all who fear for their sight. Support doctors and caregivers too.

Today: Pray by name for someone with an eye disease, or do them a favor.



Lighting a candle and praying with Saint Lucy.

Day 7: Standing firm

Before the governor, Lucy refused to sacrifice to idols. Tradition says no one could move her: an image of a faithfulness nothing can shake. Her strength did not come from stubbornness but from her trust in Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help me stand firm in the faith when it is mocked or challenged, without harshness and without fear.

Today: Dare to tell someone, simply, what faith means to you.

Day 8: The gift of her life

Lucy died young, after receiving Communion, according to the account. Her martyrdom was the offering of a life already given. What she had given little by little, she gave all at once.

Prayer: Jesus, you gave yourself to the end: unite my life to yours, in small things as in great ones.

Today: Go to a weekday Mass, or spend some time in Eucharistic adoration.

Day 9: Toward Christmas

Lucy stands in the middle of Advent like a night-light. Her light announces the light of Christmas, the coming of the One who is the light of the world. Like her, we are called to keep our lamps burning while we wait for him, and to carry his light to others.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Lucy, prepare my heart to welcome you. Amen.

Today: Read the prologue of the Gospel according to John (John 1:1-14), which proclaims the true light that enlightens everyone.

Closing prayer

Saint Lucy, virgin and martyr, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for me, for those who suffer from their eyes and for all who walk in the night. Obtain for us the light of faith, a generous heart and faithfulness to the end. Prepare us to welcome Christ, the true light, at Christmas. Amen.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Syracuse

The Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro (*Santa Lucia al Sepolcro*) in Syracuse stands on the spot where tradition places the martyrdom and burial of Saint Lucy, in the early 4th century. Built above vast Christian catacombs, it is the heart of the saint's cult in her native city, even though her body now rests in Venice.

The place of martyrdom and burial

The basilica is in the Borgata district, on the mainland, across from the island of Ortygia, which forms the old center of Syracuse. In antiquity this area lay outside the city, where Christians buried their dead. Beneath the church and its surroundings lies one of Syracuse's catacomb complexes, where Lucy's grave was venerated. The present building, of Byzantine origin, has been rebuilt several times, notably in the Norman period and again in the 16th and 17th centuries.



Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Syracuse.

The Sepulcher chapel

Next to the basilica, a small octagonal church, built in the 17th century by the architect Giovanni Vermexio, houses the saint's empty tomb. Connected to the catacombs, it marks the traditional site of her burial. A marble statue there shows Lucy lying down, in the pose of a recumbent effigy. It is the most prayerful place in the sanctuary.

Caravaggio in Syracuse

In 1608, on the run after leaving Malta, Caravaggio stayed in Syracuse. He was commissioned to paint a large canvas for the church of the Sepulcher: *The Burial of Saint Lucy*. In a stark composition, two gravediggers dig the earth in the foreground, while the body of the young martyr, lying on the ground, is surrounded by a bishop and a few of the faithful. At different times, the work has been displayed in the basilica or in other churches of the city.

The December 13 feast

Every year, around December 13, Syracuse celebrates its patroness. The silver statue of Saint Lucy, kept in the Cathedral of Ortygia, is carried in procession through the city to the Basilica of the Sepulcher, where it stays for several days before returning to the cathedral. A second feast takes place in the spring, in May. These celebrations gather the people of Syracuse and many pilgrims from Sicily.



Basilica of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro in Syracuse, the interior.

Praying in Syracuse

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Lucy. On site, a time of silence in the Sepulcher chapel is a chance to entrust an intention, especially for someone with an eye ailment or going through a dark time. The prayer to Saint Lucy can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.

Other places of Saint Lucy

- **Venice**: the Church of San Geremia, on the Grand Canal, has kept her body since 1863, after the demolition of the old Church of Santa Lucia, on whose site the railway station that bears her name was built.
- **Syracuse**: the Cathedral of Ortygia, built within an ancient Greek temple, where a chapel houses the saint's silver statue.
- **Catania**: the Cathedral of Saint Agatha, where, according to tradition, Lucy and her mother came to pray.
- **Sweden and the Nordic countries**: the Saint Lucy celebrations on December 13, in churches and schools.

Practical information

Syracuse can be reached by road and train from Catania, whose airport is the nearest. The basilica is in the modern city, about a twenty-minute walk from Ortygia. The catacombs can be visited only at certain hours, and often with a guide. Ask the parish or the Archdiocese of Syracuse before you come, especially around the feast.

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