

The Legends of Lucy of Syracuse



How did a girl who died for her faith in the 4th century AD in Sicily become a symbol of the Christmas season with candles in her hair and a tray of sweet breads in Scandinavia? In between are many legends, and maybe just a few facts.

Santa Lucia's Day is the first day of the Christmas Celebration in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. How Lucia is celebrated today stems partly from a beauty contest arranged by a Swedish newspaper in the twenties, and partly from traditions going back many years before that. On the morning of the 13th, a young girl previously elected is dressed up as Lucia in a white gown with a red sash, and with a crown of lingonberry and lit candles on her head. Followed by all her handmaids and some boys called star lads, all carrying lit candles in their hands, she goes from house to house (or just into her parent's bedroom with her younger siblings as star lads and handmaids) singing songs dedicated to Lucia, and offering coffee or wine (glögg) mulled with almonds and raisins, saffron buns, and ginger bread cookies.

St. Lucia's feast day commemorates the day of her martyrdom, December 13th, which also was the shortest day of the year – Winter Solstice under the old Gregorian calendar. Because her name means "light," many of the ancient light and fire customs of the Yuletide became associated with her day. Thus we find "Lucy candles" were lighted in homes and "Lucy fires" burned in the outdoors. Before the Reformation, Saint Lucy's Day was one of unusual celebration and festivity because, for the people of Sweden and Norway, she was the great "light saint" who turned the tides of their long winter and brought the light of the day to renewed victory. Similarly, Lucia



Modern "Santa Lucia" with sheaf of wheat

became the patron saint for the "light of the body"--the eyes, which may be the source of legends that she was blinded and her eyesight miraculously restored; and the way she was represented in Italian art with her eyes on a plate.

Over a thousand years ago, King Canute of the Norsemen declared that Christmas would begin with her feast, and last for a month. But how did this Italian girl who died for her faith in 303 A.D. come to be so revered in the far Northern lands of Scandinavia?

Perhaps a clue lays in the tray of sweet breads she carries. A part of the Scandinavian legends about Lucia was how during a severe winter's famine, she was seen with her white robes and halo bringing in a ship full of food over lake of Vänern. A similar miracle deliverance is described in her native Sicily.

Traditions tell the legend of how there was a great hunger in Syracuse, Sicily, and the town's people had gathered in the cathedral on her feast day, December 13th, to pray, and two ships loaded with wheat arrived, with her at the helm of one, dressed in white, with a halo of candles on her head. This is the explanation given for the *cucci*, or cooked wheat which is an ingredient in all her festival 's foods. *Cuccia*, a kind of sweet porrage is made with wheat berries, chocolate, sugar and milk. Each family has their own versions of this dish. It is thought perhaps Viking traders, who traveled even the Mediterranean seas long ago, may have taken her legends home with them, and that is how Lucia came to the far North.

Few saints have their own songs, but Lucia has a number of popular songs—some that children sing, one in particular has been recorded by Caruso, Mario Lanza and Elvis Presley:

*Santa Lucia, thy light is glowing
Through darkest winter night, Comfort bestowing,
Dreams float on dreams tonight,
Comes then the morning light,
Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia*

She was one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages. She was one of the virgin martyrs honored in Rome during the 6th century, and was mentioned by the such as the Venerable Bebe; Gregory the Great; and others. But who was the girl that drew all this attention? Lucy was born in Syracuse, Sicily in 283 A.D., the daughter of wealthy parents; her father Roman, her mother Greek. Traditions say she was raised as a Christian, but sadly her father died when she was young. It was said that Lucy was quite beautiful, and had many admirers, but she had decided to give her life to serving the Christian God and refused all suitors. Lucy made a secret vow of virginity, but her mother was pressing her to marry a rich unbeliever.

For three years Lucy resisted being forced into that marriage unwillingly. At the same time, according to the legends she bought food which she smuggled to the Christians who were hiding from the Roman persecutors in dark underground tunnels. To light her way, and free her hands to carry bread, Lucy wore a wreath of candles on her head. It was the times of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who severely persecuted the church.

Yet another legend - in parts, most reliable — it is said that her mother, Eutychia, suffering a severe sickness, had been healed as she prayed with her daughter beside the grave of St. Agatha (who had been killed by the Romans 52 years previously). As a result, Lucy was allowed to break her engagement and Lucia gave her dowry of money and jewels to the poor instead. When her former fiancée heard about this, he cruelly reported her to the Roman authorities.

It is here that the blood red sash of Lucia's costume is explained. We do not know the details of her suffering and death. Some legends tell of several deliverances from torture and execution attempts. Lucy may have been abused, burned, beheaded, or stabbed through the heart. Regardless of how she died, judging by the impact her trials had upon later Christians, it is clear she demonstrated a strong faith and much courage both in living and in dying for the Lord Jesus she loved.

St. Lucia's day is a celebration of legends, but it is also a remembering of a young woman who truly loved Jesus. The white robe speaks of her commitment to purity, and the red sash of her testimony of faith in her Savior even to dying. The tray of sweet breads reminds us that she loved and served the poor and the persecuted with her life. Finally, the crown of evergreens and the halo of candles speak of the eternal life Lucy has now in Jesus. Hebrews 11:35 speaks of those who suffer willingly for their faith, "so that they might rise again to a better life."

Jesus is the true "Light of the World."
He is the reason for the season.



The Legends of Lucy of Syracuse

Told by Eldrbarry

Christmas 2003 ---- Barry McWilliams (eldrbarry)
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church, Lake Stevens, Wa
<http://www.eldrbarry.net/mous/saint/eldrxmas.htm>