

# THE RELIGIOUS FEAST OF ST. AGATHA. A MODERN INITIATION RITE IN CATANIA

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*This religious feast is one of the most important in the Mediterranean area. It attracts a very large number of the faithful, especially young people, who live out this commemorative moment like an casual appointment with the patron saint of Catania, a town in the Sicilian region of southern Italy. This analysis shows how the event represents not only a religious feast, consecrating the annual encounter between the saint and her local community, but also a kind of modern youth initiation rite.*

Keywords: *patron saint, initiation rite, youth, community, participation.*

*Verski praznik sv. Agate je eden najpomembnejših na sredozemskem območju. Privabi številne vernike, posebej mlade, ki doživijo ta kome-morativni dogodek kot priložnostno srečanje z zavetnikom Catanije, sicilijanskega mesta na jugu Italije. Analiza pokaže, da ta dogodek ni le verski praznik, namenjen letnemu srečanju med svetnico in lokalno skupnostjo, marveč je tudi vrsta modernega mladostniškega iniciacijskega rituala.*

Ključne besede: *svetnik zavetnik, iniciacijski ritual, mladost, skupnost, udeležba.*

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Celebrations in honor of Catania's patron saint start immediately after the Epiphany (6 January). The range of religious events and expressions of popular devotion during January give locals and visitors a flavor of the feast itself, held in February. The program includes pilgrimages to places connected with devotion to St. Agatha (Ital. *Sant'Agata*), conferences, visits to monuments, a display of the towering votive candles (Ital. *candelore*), concerts, performances, sports competitions, and much more, connecting the holy element with the profane. The many churches dedicated to St. Agatha are places of interest because of the spiritual, historical, and hagiographic journey they take visitors on.

The church of St. Agatha the Vetust (Ital. *S. Agata la Vetere*) stands on the site of Agatha's trial, and houses evidence of the torture she was subjected to as well as archeological and iconographic items dating from before the terrible earthquake of 1693, from the Norman and Byzantine periods. The church is also home to the *candelora*, or huge symbolic votive candle. The church of the Carcere encloses the remains of the Roman prison where Agatha

was held, which coincides with the area of the third century governor's or magistrate's hall (the *praetorium*).

On Sundays in January, the sanctuary (*santuario*) hosts solemn rites in honor of St. Agatha, who was left to the mercy of a lion during that month in A.D. 251. The powerful virginal veil, or *flammeum*, which was used to shroud the saint's body immediately after her death, is displayed in the triptych alcove of St. Agatha's martyrdom during the last ten days of the month. Local associations of the faithful organize moments of prayer and tributes to the patron saint, including torchlight processions in which the veil is carried under a red canopy.

At 7 pm on the Saturday before the last Sunday, a procession leaves the Church of St. Agatha at the Furnace (Ital. *S. Agata alla Fornace*), where the faithful have their traditional white smocks (Ital. *sacco*) blessed. The procession makes its way to the church of the Collegiata. The *candelore* begin their circuit on the second Sunday in January, with a wax effigy of the people's bishop, Bishop Ventimiglia, and a *candelora* restored courtesy of the town authorities. The church of Saint Francis houses the greatest number of effigies, and on 20 January the butchers' votive candle with an image of Saint Sebastian is carried around Ursino Castle. On the last Sunday, it is the turn of candles borne by associations of grocers, greengrocers, and pasta makers. These guarantee spectacular scenes in the fish market (Ital. *pescheria*), at the fruit and vegetable market, and in the old town. The locals usually wait impatiently for the turn of the fishmongers' candle, which is the first market, and at the port, where the procession is accompanied by a display of fireworks. The center of the celebration focuses on 3–5 February, when three days of cult activity, devotion, folklore, and tradition begin, involving all of the local community and visitors arriving from elsewhere in Italy and abroad.

#### THE CANDELORA DAY. A SUGGESTIVE POPULAR USAGE

Agatha was a 3rd-century Sicilian virgin martyr persecuted by a Roman proconsul (Quinziano) whose love was not returned. He persecuted her because of her Christian faith. Among the tortures she underwent was having her breasts cut off. She is therefore often depicted iconographically carrying her excised breasts on a platter.

Between legend and history, it is known that after Agatha's death a terrible earthquake devastated the country and Quinziano ran away with his horse, finally falling into the Simeto River. This episode represents the epilogue because Quinziano's body was not found.

Agatha's name is Greek and its etymology means "good." Historical sources report many miracles attributed to her. Today, people say Agatha protects Catania from natural phenomena, demonstrating her love for the town. An example is the eruptions of the volcano Etna in 252, 1444, and 1669, which were all averted by presenting Agatha's veil (*flammeum*) in front of the lava flow. The legend says that the original white color of the veil, a symbol



Fig. 1: The religious procession in the crowded street in Catania [All photos by the author].

of candor and purity, then changed to red. Today the veil is preserved in a reliquary. Other natural phenomena include the earthquakes of 1169, 1693, and 1908. Finally, legends refer to epidemics in 1575 and 1743. In both cases, people began to pray spontaneously in procession, entreating St. Agatha for protection. In addition, it is known that this cult has adopted some elements inherited from the Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis: the seafaring rite, the white linen tunic similar to the *sacco*, Isis' veil, and women's prominent involvement recall the *'ntuppateddi* masked women of the 18th century.

In the late 19th century, the prominent Sicilian folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè noted that few saints in Sicily had as great a cult as St. Agatha: Palermo, the capital, and Catania competed in honoring her, until Palermo finally recognized another patron saint (Santa Rosalia) in 1625, after her intervention against an epidemic.

Catania's local faith is so strong that the monogram "A" appears on the civic emblem, on the front of the town hall,



Fig. 2: The characteristic votive *candelora*.

and in the university crest. For this reason, the three-day celebrations in February constitute three different moments and also consolidate them all. The first day represents an old custom that goes back to 1450: the votive offering made by municipal delegations as sign of devotion. On this subject, many religious feasts in the Mediterranean area express the local community's need to establish closeness with the patron saint, in order to manifest the necessity of protection and support on earth.

The *candelora* consists of a large, tall wooden structure housing a tall candle. The wooden structure is richly decorated with little statues of saints, angels, *putti*, sculptural groups, scenes from Agatha's life, ribbons, flowers, and *ex voto*. On each side there are strong rods used to lift it (the entire object weighs 500 to 700 kg). The *candelora* symbolizes the feast for the virgin's purification; the candles are blessed on this occasion. In the 17th century, *candelore* were called *gigli* or *gilli* 'lilies'. Their parade is a living example of the baroque in motion; today there are 11 of them with an established order in the procession: the first is the Bishop Ventimiglia *candelora*, the last is St. Agatha's Circle, and in the middle there are the grocers' *candelore*. This procession also includes municipal delegations, clerical deputations, and professional corporations.

For forty years there has been an international foot race in the afternoon. This event clearly represents a profane element of the entire celebration. It appears to express an attempt to refunctionalize the feast in the contemporary age. In any case, the aim is the same: aggregating the locals around the patron saint. In the evening a fireworks display closes this first day. In the 17th century there were songs and concerts.

## THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ST. AGATHA AND HER FAITHFUL. THE CROWDED EMBRACE

The second day of the celebration begins at dawn and is the more suggestive and exciting one. It is an expression of this festive time, very different from the working articulation of the day. In fact, at 4 am, the square in front of the cathedral is filled with people, not only believers but many visitors from across Sicily and emigrants as well. It is an extra-religious gathering: believers and non-believers await the appointment with Agatha.

Devotees both young and old are recognizable because they wear the *sacco*, which is composed of five elements: a white linen tunic, a black hat (Ital. *scuzzetta*), a cord, gloves, and a handkerchief. The *sacco* represents the devotee's uniform. Some believe the *sacco* recalls the white tunic worn for the goddess Isis, and according to others it represents the white nightshirt that the people of Catania wore in August 1126, when Agatha's reliquary came back from Constantinople to Catania. According to a third perspective, the *sacco* could be a penitential habit and the color white would symbolize purity. Finally, the white gloves could be worn as sign of respect in honor of the saint, and the cord may represent chastity. The last element, the handkerchief, serves to express joy and exultation. In Duomo Square, white

becomes the main color; adolescents and young men in particular place themselves right in front of the main gate and by the side gates, waiting for 5 am. For them, the event has an atmosphere of initiation; they are prepared to demonstrate their ability in front of the entire community. Their aim is to reach the high altar (Ital. *cameredda*); that is, the niche closed with an iron gate, from which the “master of devotional equipment” (Ital. *mastro di vara*) and his staff will remove Agatha’s silver bust.

When the gate is opened, the running becomes frenetic and frantic: at this point the high altar is covered by devotees and the entire church overflows with people. The codified behavior usually observed in a holy place is forgotten: every method for reaching the best position to see the saint is permitted. Some go up onto the side altars. The emotion rises very quickly:

when the bust is taken to the high altar, people can be heard intoning the well-known hymn “Semu tutti devoti tutti . . . Citatini! Evviva Sant’Aita” (We are devotees . . . Citizen! Long live St. Agatha), which is repeated three times, in accordance with the magic number. At the same time, all the devotees start waving their handkerchiefs, creating simultaneous movement in the cathedral. The traditional exclamation is an expression of faith, jubilation, or recall. It is also an expression of the unity of the local community that feels so near



Fig. 3: The silver bust of Sant’Agata.



Fig 4: The believers offer candles to their patron saint during the procession.

to its saint. Like many rites, the annual celebration seeks to rediscover its collective essence.

Before beginning the procession, St. Agatha's bust is collocated on the devotional equipment (Ital. *fercolo* or *vara*) and the solemn mass is celebrated; then the *fercolo* exits the cathedral travels around the streets all day. The devotional equipment is decorated with white carnations on 4 February, and with red carnations on the 5th. The white carnations represent purity and the virgin's faith, and the red carnations martyrdom and Agatha's mysticism.

In the crowded streets, devotees follow the holy canopy, lighting candles and more candles. The floor becomes very treacherous because of the melted wax; and the young people snake along in a procession. They do not seem very interested in religious prayers; instead they seem to take part in the celebration as though it is a trial that they cannot afford to miss. During the morning of February 4, while the procession continues, they prepare themselves for the second crucial test: the Capuchins' slope (Ital. *salita dei Cappuccini*). Here the *fercolo* is pulled by devotees, especially the young, who take a running start to better pull the devotional equipment. As in many religious feasts, this trial is a dangerous test: the slope is very steep and the *fercolo* is very heavy. Then the procession continues for the entire day, with many stops: the saint is with her faithful, who do not wish to leave her side. The round therefore finishes in the middle of the night, when the "little saint" (Ital. *santuzza*) returns to the cathedral for the night. On the next day, the 5th, the festivities start again.



Fig 5: The return in the Cathedral.

On this day, the devotees continue to take the *vara* around. During the procession, they arrive at Saint Julian's slope (Ital. *salita di S. Giuliano*), which constitutes another difficult trial because it is steep. Here expert devotees advise the youngest on how to avoid tripping: it is necessary to maintain a constant speed with one's foot in a different position from that of the next devotee. All the people assisting applaud and exhort. If the trial is passed well, this means that the coming year will be good. After other prayers and meditation, the procession prepares to return to the church. At this moment, devotees hold on to the *fercolo* because they do not want to be separated from their patron saint.

Every year the procession slows down hour by hour. When the holy bust reenters the church, the desperate devotees shout from fatigue and fanaticism. They will see their patron only on 17 August, at the "little procession" when the bust is exposed. They know that the celebration is concluding. In 2004, the procession concluded on the 6th at 8 am, about 25 hours late.

The cult of St. Agatha is not strictly Catanian: the saint is venerated all over the world. St. Agatha is the patron of 44 Italian municipalities, and 14 of them bear her name. In addition, St. Agatha is among the patrons of Malta and San Marino. In Spain, she is worshipped in Andalusia and in Jčria (Valencia). The chapel in Barcelona where the Catholic sovereigns welcomed Christopher Columbus back from his first trip to America is dedicated to St. Agatha. An interesting tradition takes place in Zamarramal (Segovia): on 5 February, women are the masters of the city. In Portugal, St. Agatha is the patron of Agueda. In Germany, Agatha is the patron of Aschaffenburg. In France, Agatha is venerated in Le Fournet (Normandy). The cult was grandiosely celebrated in Constantinople, and in Greece the saint is extremely popular, especially in the Aetolian region. A cult of St. Agatha even exists in Viayawala, India, and in Argentina, where she is the patron of firefighters. The cult is widespread in Italy, especially in Lombardy, but also in Rome, Florence, and Naples. However, the number of participants and variegated events makes Catania the most important expression of the spectacle and folklore of this religious cult.

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## VERSKI PRAZNIK SV. AGATE. SODOBNI INICIACIJSKI RITUAL V CATANIJI

*Religiozni praznik sv. Agate je eden najpomembnejših na sredozemskem območju. Vsako leto privabi izjemno število vernikov, posebej mladih ljudi, ki doživijo ta komemorativni trenutek kot priložnostno in neobvezujoče srečanje z zavetnico Catanije v tridnevnem praznovanju med 3. in 5. februarjem. Prvega dne je procesija z darovanjem voska, mednarodno tekmovanje in zvečer ognjemet; drugi dan sta na sporedu obisk – srečanje s podobo sv. Agate in tek skozi skozi mesto, zvečer pa se praznovanje razširi ob vsej poti, kavarne so odprte vso noč, naposled sledi še ognjemet; tretji dan podoba sv. Agate potuje po drugi poti, zvečer je znova ognjemet. Sodelovanje pri teku, pridržano za mlade, je znamenje ljubezni in vdanosti sv. Agati.*

*Analiza pokaže, da ta dogodek ni le verski praznik, ki slavi letno srečanje med svetnikom in lokalno skupnostjo, marveč je s tekom in drugimi dejavnostmi mladih tudi nekakšen sodoben mladostniški iniciacijski ritual.*

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