

To the ring of the bell: Saint Lucia's bellringer

The bell still rings out at the head of the head of the procession of Saint Lucia (Lucy). He is still there in front of the sacred statue, "The bellringer". What's more, the devotees of the patron saint vie with one another to gain the sought after-privilege of leading the procession of Saint Lucia to the sound of the ancient bell.

Every year there are set procedures to decide on the name of the bellringer, the person who will lead the procession, right in front of the statue, from its beginning, to set the pace of the pauses whilst the bearers, sweating from the great weight but pleased all the same, bellow out in unison: "Syracusans... long live Saint Luciiiiiaaaa...". The effect is enough to send a shiver down the spine even of those who do not believe because at that moment of collective exaltation when everyone is transported by one single cry, the non believer will notice that he is trembling like everyone else.

Saint Lucia's statue

The bellringer

is centre stage, shoulders back in his pristine tails, his shirt-front and gloves white, his beret green - the colour of the devotees of Saint Lucia - and the bell in this hands. The usual rituals are carried out, a prayer or an offering. Then there is another ring. It is him again who rings the holy bell and leads the procession, the bellringer.

This honour is always given to the carpenter's guild. This is written in an existing old deed, from 1914, in the documents of Assembly of the Chapel of Saint Lucia in which all the relevant regulations and details concerning the nomination can be found.

Every year, in October or November, the carpenters elect the bellringer. There are in fact two, one for December's festivity and the other for May's. In May the ritual is renewed in memory of the year (1646) a terrible famine hit the population of Syracuse. The people were gathered together in the cathedral praying. Two doves flew into the cathedral and perched on the archbishop's throne and there they stayed until it was announced, to everyone's rejoicing, that two ships with a cargo of grain and cereals had docked in the port.

Both the senate and the people established that that day be remembered every year with a procession of the patron saint and the setting free of doves in the cathedral square.

In this way two devotees have the chance to hold the bell and lead the procession of Saint Lucia every year, one in December and one in May. At these elections two bellringers are chosen and each one fulfills his duty twice: one on the thirteenth and the twentieth of December; the other one on the first Sunday in May

and on the following one for the octave.

The sacred bell rings out four times a year through the streets of the town, followed by Saint Lucia's statue. The cley, the authorities, the band and the devotees all move to the rhythm of this sound and the bellringer has two big occasions in which he believes with all his heart.

Once upon a time the "Senate Carriage" was also in the procession. The ancient carriage was drawn by four magnificent horses preceded and followed by two pairs of horses as outriders. The coachmen and riders wore the solemn livery dedicated to the saint. That role too was a much sought-after honour as was the task of finding the horses for the procession.

Nowadays the "Senate Carriage" is too shoddy and rickety to be in the procession. It has been "embalmed" within four glass walls in one of the porticoes of the town hall and has become a tourist attraction.

Today is just the same as it was years ago thanks to a sense of tradition and a faith that have not changed or weakened. The bellringer rings his bell now as he did then.

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Al suono della campanella: "u campaniddaru" di Santa Lucia