

Saint Lucia and Lucia of Sweden

Saint Lucia, the patron saint of Syracuse, was born in about 283 into one of the town's well-known wealthy families. Betrothed to a pagan, she refused the marriage to keep the vow of chastity she had made to saint Agatha for the recovery of her sick mother.

She was reported by her fiancè to the local councilor, prefect Pascanio, to whom she confessed her faith in Christ and was thus condemned to martyrdom but the guards could not move her despite the intervention of many guards and donkeys.

The prefect ordered her to be burnt but the flames could not burn her. Lucia was then beheaded but before this she pulled out her eyes and threw them at Pascanio's feet. That is why she is considered the symbol of light and the protector of our sight.

Lucia of Sweden

Since 1970, on the saint's feast day the Autonomous Tourist Board has organized the "Lucia of Sweden and the Swedish Week" which is a sort of twinning between Syracuse and Sweden in honour of saint Lucia.

In reality in Sweden the thirteenth of December has been considered a solemn day for many centuries, it is also the winter solstice which marks the end of long nights. The Vikings used to celebrate the return of light after months of darkness. In the middle ages, in the region of Varmland, a young girl, dressed in white with a crown of lights around her head, used to wake those asleep offering them a glass of malvasia (a sweet dessert wine) in honour of saint Lucia.

However it was until 1927 that the festivity took on a national character thanks to the initiative of engineer Willed and the daily newspaper, Stockholms Dagbladet. The Swedish paper ran a contest to elect "Lucia of Sweden", ideally a beautiful clean-living young girl whose job would be to collect donations to be given to the needy.

The competition was a roaring success, so much so that "Lucia" has become the very symbol of Sweden. In every family the youngest female member spends the night looking over the other members, wearing a white dress and a crown of lights around her head. Then she offers them breakfast. In workplaces all over Sweden a "Lucia" is elected. On thirteenth December, the hostess of the national Scandinavian airline, S.A.S., abandon their uniforms in favour of the traditional tunic and crown of lights.

However it is naturally the "National Lucia", the winner of the contest organised by the magazine Arent Runt, who gets the most attention. The winner is crowned during a sumptuous ceremony - held in Skansen, Stockholm - by the Nobel Prize winner in the presence of the Swedish royalty.

For promotional reasons the Autonomous Tourist Board unites the Christian festivity celebrated in honour of the saint in Syracuse with the Swedish tradition. "Lucia of Sweden" is invited to participate in the celebrations which are organised from thirteenth to the twentieth of December.

During the "Swedish week" exhibitions, debates and round tables are organised based on the main theme of the event which always deals with a different aspect of Swedish culture. Previous editions have been dedicated to cinema, theatre, literature, fiction, poetry and town planning. Numerous key figures have taken part such as Mario Luzi, Stanislaw Nievo, Lars Forsell a member of the Swedish Royal Academy, the actors K. Bergkvist and Borje Loresell, Yvonne Riding - Miss Universe and elected "Lucia of Sweden" in 1983, Sven Broman "Grand old man" of Swedish journalism and the only journalist to have interviewed Greta Garbo.

Articolo di DOMENICO MIRABELLA

tratto da La Provincia di Siracusa
Bimestrale della Provincia Regionale di Siracusa

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