Lucy of Syracuse. Patron saint of eye disorders

Lucía de Siracusa: Santa patrona de las enfermedades de los ojos

Carlos Ortiz-Hidalgo*

Department of Pathological Anatomy, Hospital y Fundación Médica Sur, Department of Cell and Tissue Biology, Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City, Mexico

Abstract

Saint Lucy (the virgin martyr of Syracuse) is recognized today as the patroness of those who suffer from blindness and eye ailments. Lucy was accused of being a Christian and was executed in Syracuse in 304 during the Diocletianic Persecution. Lucy had consecrated her virginity to God; however, her mother, Eutychia arranged Lucy's marriage to a young man. Lucy refused to marry him and was punished by governor Paschasius, who ordered the guards to remove her eyes. This is the reason why Lucy is the patron saint of eye illnesses. When her body was being prepared for burial, it was discovered that her eyes had been miraculously restored. In paintings, Lucy is frequently shown holding her eyes on a golden dish. She also holds the palm branch, a symbol of martyrdom, and victory over evil. Her feast day is December 13th.

Key words: Saint Lucy. Patroness of the blind.

Resumen

Santa Lucía (la Virgen mártir de Siracusa) es reconocida como la patrona de aquellos que sufren de ceguera y enfermedades oculares. Lucía fue acusada de ser cristiana y fue martirizada en Siracusa en el año 304 durante la persecución de Diocleciano. Lucía había consagrado su virginidad a Dios, sin embargo, su madre, Eutiquia, le arregló matrimonio con un joven, y Lucía se negó a casarse con él y fue castigada por el gobernador Pascasio, quien ordenó a los guardias que le quitaran los ojos. Esta es la razón por la cual esta santa es la patrona de las enfermedades oculares. Cuando su cuerpo estaba preparado para ser enterrado, se descubrió que sus ojos habían sido milagrosamente restaurados. En las pinturas, Lucía es mostrada con los ojos en un plato dorado y también sosteniendo la rama de palma, que simboliza el martirio y la victoria sobre el mal. Su fiesta se celebra el 13 de diciembre.

Palabra clave: Saint Lucy. Patrona de las enfermedades de los ojos.

Introduction

Of all the saints who have been linked to eye diseases, Lucy of Syracuse has been the most popular (Table 1). Saint Lucy is the patron saint of the blind and an advocate

for visual problems, and many patients afflicted with eye disorders implore this saint to ask for mediation for their ailment¹. Lucy, in addition, is the patron of those patients with throat diseases and also of electricians, dressmakers,

Correspondence:

*Carlos Ortiz-Hidalgo

Av. Puente de Piedra, 150

Col. Toriello Guerra, Del. Tlalpan

C.P. 14060, Mexico City, Mexico

E-mail: ortizhidalgocarlos@gmail.com

Date of reception: 26-04-2020

Date of acceptance: 12-06-2020

DOI: 10.24875/RMOE.M20000146

Available online: 11-01-2021

Rev Mex Oftalmol (Eng). 2021;95(1):27-32

www.rmo.com.mx

2604-1731/© 2020 Sociedad Mexicana de Oftalmología. Published by Permayer. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Table 1. Some patron saints for eye disease protection

Saint	Date	Characteristics/patronage
Saint Lucy of Syracuse	(283- ibid, 304) Holiday: December 13	Protector of sight, it derives from the etymological closeness of the Greek name "Lucy" with the Latin term <i>lux</i> = light. Also protector of electricians.
Blessed Margaret of Città di Castello	(1287-April 1, 1320)	She was blind from birth. Beatified in 1609 by Pope Paul V.
St. Ansfrid of Utrecht	(? -May 3, 1010)	At the end of his days, he was blind, but at the time of his death, he saw a bright light in his room.
Saint Herveo (Hervé) of Brittany	*(c. 521-556) Holiday: June 17	He was blind from birth.
Saint Audomar (Omer) of Therouanne	(? -670). Holiday: September 9	He lost his sight at the end of his life. Invoked for sight disorders.
Saint Eustasius of Luxeuil	(c. 560-c. 626) Holiday: April 2	It is said that he cured Santa Sadalberga of blindness and that invoking him through prayers can cure blindness.
Saint Salomon (Salaün) of Brittany	(? -874). Holiday: June 25	He was blinded before being martyred and killed in church by his adversaries.
Saint Ulrich of Zell	(1029-1093) Holiday: July 14	Two years before his death, he lost his sight.
Saint Godeleva of Ghistelles	(c. 1049-1070) Holiday: July 6	Revered for the healing of Edith, a blind girl.
Saint Maxellendis of Caudry	(? -670). Holiday: November 13	She is a protector against sight disorders.
Saint Odile (Otilia) of Alsace	(662-720) Holiday: December 13-14	She was born blind but gained vision when she was baptized. Odile = daughter of light

peasants, drivers, sharpeners, cutters, glassmakers, writers, and of various cities such as Syracuse, Venice, Pedro del Monte in Burgos, Santa Lucia in Panama, Mos-soró in Brazil, and Moche in Peru, among many others^{1,2}.

Lucy, whose name means light (Latin, *lucius/lux*), was one of the eleven officially recognized saints since 600. She was a Christian martyr who suffered martyrdom during the great persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian (*Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus Augustus*) (244-311)¹. Her feast is celebrated in at least 20 Italian cities and in different locations around the world, and there are numerous churches dedicated to her. Her feast is December 13 in both Catholic and Anglican, Orthodox, and Lutheran churches (Lucy is the only saint accepted by the Lutheran church, except Saint Stephen, whose celebration has been absorbed by the celebration of Saint Lucy). In the 6th century, Lucia was already venerated and Pope Gregory the Great (Saint Gregory) (c. 540-604) was the one who included her in the canon of the mass, added special prayers and chants (Gregorian sacramental chant) and also included her in the liturgical book of the Latin rites of the Catholic Church (the antiphony). Likewise, Saint

Gregory gave the name of this saint to two convents that he founded in the year 590. The story of the life of Saint Lucy goes back to a 5th-century narrative, recounted in the Act of the Martyrs (*Acta Martyrum*)^{1,2}.

Saint Lucy and martyrdom

Saint Lucy was born in the year 283, into a prosperous and respected family, in Syracuse, a city located on the southeast coast of the island of Sicily. Her father, named Lucio, died when she was 5 years old and her mother, Eutiquia, was the one who raised her in the Christian faith. Being very young, Lucy decided to consecrate her life to God and rejected the marriage proposal of several young men. Eutiquia was very ill, with constant bleeding, and she knew that the doctors had given her no hope for recovery. For this reason, the two made a 67-km pilgrimage, from Syracuse to the city of Catania, to the sanctuary of Saint Agueda (who had been martyred 52 years before), and to ask her to heal her illness. Upon reaching the tomb, they spent a whole night praying, and they say that, while they slept, Agueda appeared surrounded by angels and told Lucy that she herself possessed healing

gifts and that her mother would be healed by her faith. This passage was illustrated by the Venetian painter Jacobello Del Fiore (1370-1439) in the painting titled *Saint Lucy before the tomb of Saint Agueda* (Fig. 1). Agueda told Lucy that, just as Christ had helped the city of Catania, he would help Syracuse (*"Sicut per me civitas Catanensium sublimatur a Christo, ita per te Syracusana civitas decorabitur"*), and, at that moment, her mother was cured³. Back in Syracuse, Lucy pleaded with her mother to never give her up in marriage, as she wanted to consecrate her life to God and to distribute all her possessions among the poor. Eutiquia agreed to her request and both began to distribute their belongings among the most disadvantaged. However, as time passed, her mother, without any explanation, forced Lucy to accept in marriage a young pagan whom Lucy rejected^{2,4}. The young man, disgusted, accused her before the proconsul of Syracuse of being a Christian at the time of the great persecution of Christians by Emperor Diocletian. Consul Pascasio ordered that Lucy be brought before a judge, who pressured her to desist from the Christian faith. Then Lucy replied: "it is useless to insist. I will never be able to separate myself from the love of my Lord Jesus Christ ... Pure sacrifice before God is to visit widows, orphans, and pilgrims who are in distress and need, and it is already the third year that they offer me sacrifices to God in Jesus Christ handing over all my goods." Furious at her response, the consul arranged for her to be taken to a brothel to be raped, to which Lucy exclaimed: "the body is contaminated only if the soul is conscious." They say that Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224/1225-1274), considered one of the greatest figures in systematic theology, praised these responses from Saint Lucy.

To lead her to the brothel, the soldiers tied her hands and feet with ropes, but no matter how hard they tried, they could not move her. The legend indicates that, while she was arguing with the consul, the Holy Spirit made her so heavy that even several oxen could not move her. Upon learning of what had happened, the consul ordered her to be tortured with boiling oil but could not make her desist. This scene is often depicted in paintings such as the one titled *The Martyrdom of Saint Lucy*, made in 1596 by Leandro (dal Ponte) Bassano (1557-1622), or that of Giovanni di Bartolomeo Cristiani (1340-1398), titled *Saint Lucy resisting efforts to move her*; both are in the Abbey of San Giorgio Maggiore, in Venice (Fig. 2).

The consul, upon learning of what had happened, and convinced that Lucy was a witch, ordered to burn her at stake, but, after burning and consuming all the wood,

Figure 1. Saint Lucy before the tomb of Saint Agueda. Author: Jacobello Del Fiore. Civic Museum, Fermo, Italy.

Figure 2. Saint Lucy resisting efforts to move her. Author: Giovanni di Bartolomeo Cristiani. Metropolitan Art Museum. New York, USA.

Lucy was intact. This passage was painted in tempera on wood (the oldest known pictorial technique) by the Catalan painter Bernat Martorell (1400-1452) and is titled *Martyrdom of Saint Lucy at the stake* (c. 1435) (Fig. 3). Seeing that Lucy was not harmed by the fire, he ordered that her eyes be gouged out, but she

Figure 3. Martyrdom of Saint Lucy at the stake. Author: Bernat Martorell. Courtesy of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Deposit of the Generalitat de Catalunya, Fundación Torres, 1995. © Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (2020).

immediately put them back in herself. She was finally beheaded on December 13, 304^{1,4}. A medieval narrative indicates that it was in the stands before the proconsul where they removed her eyes, but even without them, Lucy could still see⁴. Others claim that, after her eyes were gouged out, God gave her new ones, even more beautiful than those she had before⁴. They also say that they pierced her throat with a spear. Finally, Lucy was buried in the same place where a sanctuary dedicated to her was built in 313. They report that she knelt for the beheading and even after the event, Lucy continued to exhort the faithful to put their duties to God first^{1,2}.

Another legend tells that it was the beauty of Lucy's eyes that did not allow one of her suitors to rest, so she tore them out and sent them to him on a plate². Filled with remorse and surprised by her bravery, the suitor converted to Christianity. Just as there are pictorial representations where Saint Agueda is carrying her amputated breasts on a tray, Lucia appears in some medieval engravings with her eyes on a plate (Figs. 4 A and B)⁵.

Figure 4. A: Saint Lucy sculpture in wood. Museum of the Cultures of Oaxaca/Ex Convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán. B: Saint Lucy. Author: Domenico di Pace Beccafumi. Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena. In both images, Saint Lucy shows her eyes on a tray.

Figure 5. A: Facade of the temple of Saints Jeremiah and Lucy in Venice. B: Silver mask of Saint Lucy.

A further coincidence between Saint Lucy and Saint Agueda is that, in the year 1039, by order of the Byzantine general Georgios Maniaces (? -1043), the bodies of both were transferred to Constantinople to keep them away from the Arab invasion of Syracuse. A few years later, the body of Saint Agueda was returned to Catania, but it was not until the year 1204, during the fourth crusade, that the Duke of Venice, Enrico Dandolo (1107-1205), found the remains of Saint Lucy in Constantinople and took them to the monastery of St. George, and in 1280 he transferred them to Venice, where they are currently in a glass sarcophagus under the altar, in the church of Saints Jeremiah and Lucy (*Chiesa dei Santi Geremia e Lucia*), located in St. Jeremiah's square in Venice. In 1955, at the wish of the then Cardinal Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (1881-1963) (future John XXIII, "The Good Pope John"), the saint's face was covered with a silver mask (Figs. 5A and B).

Table 2. Main iconography of Saint Lucy

Author	Place/country	Painting
Anonymous	Catalonia Museum of Art, Barcelona, Spain	Santa Llúcia de Mur, cycle of his life. Panel painting, from the church of Santa Llúcia de Mur, c. 1300
Anonymous	Prado Museum. Madrid, Spain	Saint Lucy. Oil on panel
Altichiero da Zevio (c.1330-c.1393)	Oratorio di San Giorgio, Padua, Italy	Cycle of Saint Lucy. Fresco mural painting, 1379-84
Master of Estimariú (active between 1360 and 1380)	Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain	Altarpiece with the stories of the life of Saint Lucy. Painting on board, s. XIV
Bernat Martorell (1400-?)	Catalonia Museum of Art, Barcelona, Spain	Martyrdom of Saint Lucy (at the stake). Tempera on panel, 1435-1440
Anonymous	Chapel of Montalto Dora, Turin, Italy	Saint Marguerite, Saint Librada, and Saint Lucy (with her eyes over a tray). Fresco mural painting, s. XV
Andrés de Melgar (c. 1500-1554)	Catalonia Museum of Art, Barcelona, Spain	Saints Apollonia, Lucy (with her eyes over a tray), and Barbara. Oil on panel, 1530-1537
Jacobello del Fiore (c. 1370-1439)	Civic Museum, Fermo, Italy	Eutiquia and Saint Lucy before the tomb of Saint Agueda, 1410
Cosmè Tura (1430-1495)	Roma	Saint Lucy and Saint Eutiquia in the tomb of Saint Agatha 1480-1489
Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664)	Museum of Fine Arts of Chartres, France	Saint Lucy. Oil on canvas, 1636
Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1553)	Pinacoteca civica e galleria di arte contemporanea, Palazzo Pianetti, Jesi, Italy	Saint Lucy before the judge, 1523-1532
Antonio José Estruch Martínez (1835-1907)		Saint Lucy
Pietro Lorenzetti	Frole Rovinate of Florence	Table Saint Lucy, s. XIV
Niccolò di Segna (? -1348).	Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, USA	Saint Lucy
Domenico di Pace Beccafumi (1484-1551)	Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, Italy	Saint Lucy
Paolo Veronese (1528-1588)	National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA	The Martyrdom and Last Communion of Saint Lucy, 1582
Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770)	Church of the Holy Apostles, Venice, Italy	Last communion of Saint Lucy. Oil on canvas
Francesco del Cossa (1436-1477)	National Gallery of Art Washington, DC, USA	Saint Lucy. Temper on poplar panel, c. 1430-1477
Giovanni di Bartolommeo Cristiani (1340-1398)	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA	Saint Lucy and her mother in the sanctuary of Saint Agueda
Giovanni di Bartolommeo Cristiani (1340-1398)	Yale University Art Gallery, Connecticut USA	Saint Lucy enthroned, c. 1347-1400
Leandro (dal Ponte) Bassano (1557-1622)	Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, Italy	The Martyrdom of Saint Lucy, 1596
Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571-1610)	Basilica di Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, Syracuse, Italy	The burial of Saint Lucy, 1608
Carletto Veronese (c. 1570-c.1596),	Prado Museum. Madrid, Spain	The Virgin and Child with Saint Lucy and a Saint Martyr. Oil on canvas
Carlo Crivelli (c.1435-c.1495)	National Gallery, London, England	Saint Lucy, c.1430/5-1494
Agostino Ciampelli (1565-1630)	Collection British Optical Association Museum, London, England	Saint Lucy. Oil on canvas

The remains of the saint were transferred to this church in 1861 when the one originally dedicated to her was demolished to build the train station, which bears the same name: *Stazione di Venezia Santa Lucia*. As Lucy was Sicilian, there were many pressures for the saint to be returned to her birthplace, and Sicilians have had to settle for a finger from her that is venerated in their church of Saint Lucy in Syracuse. They say that a Sicilian devotee arrived in Venice and asked permission to kiss the saint's body and instead of kissing her, he bit her finger and took it hidden inside his mouth^{1,2}. It is rumored that it was the Sicilian mafia who, on Sunday, February 8, 1981, at 9 pm, stole the body of Saint Lucy from the church of San Jeremiah, in Venice. As they ran away, the bandits left part of the loot: the saint's head, a finger, and the silver mask that covered her face. The body was recovered and returned to the Church a few months later⁵.

The feast of Saint Lucy is celebrated in various cities around the world, and during the Middle Ages, the festival coincided with the winter solstice. The Vikings knew the story of Lucy and, as they were Christians, they brought her image to Sweden. The celebration of Saint Lucy represents an important tradition for them, as it symbolizes hope and light in times of darkness. Thus, in Stockholm, since about 1899, on the morning of December 13, the girls dress as "Lucy," in a white dress with a crown of seven lighted candles on their head, and the boys wear a pointed hat decorated with stars (*stjärngossar*). This is because it is said that, during a famine in Syracuse, the people of the city gathered in the cathedral to pray and ask for help, and Lucy arrived dressed in white with a halo of candles on her head, in two ships loaded with wheat. On the feast day of Saint Lucy, in Sweden, in addition, cupcakes, which are called Lucy buns (*Lussebulle*), are baked in the shape of eyes and eaten after singing traditional songs. The party ends with the election of one of the girls as "Queen of Lucy of Sweden" (*Sveriges Lucia*). Similar celebrations are held in Denmark, Finland, and Norway and are one of the most popular traditions in those countries⁴. In Baza, a city located in the north-east of the province of Granada, Andalusia, it is celebrated with the lighting of bonfires during the night of December 12 to 13, in remembrance that Lucy was burned at the stake. In the town of Hacinas, Burgos, it is the third Sunday in September that Saint Lucy is celebrated with a popular pilgrimage around the hermitage of Saint Lucy^{1,2}.

Conclusion

The first vestige of the cult of Lucy outside of Sicily is found in the city of Ravenna, Italy, in the church of San Apollinaris Nuovo, where a first representation appears included in the parade of virgins^{1,2}. Her figure is represented like almost all virgins, dressed in a tunic with different decorations on the head: crown, diadem, flowers, veil, or bare, according to Roman custom. In medieval iconography, Lucy is represented in various ways (Table 2)⁶. Usually, with a sword or a knife that pierces her neck (referring to the spear that pierced her throat), which can be accompanied by rays of light radiating from the neck wound, a book (a mark of wisdom), the palm of the martyrdom (a symbol common to all holy martyrs), an ox trampled underfoot (representing the oxen that could not move her), flames on her feet (related to martyrdom at stake), or with a lit lamp, the candle in hand or both eyes on a gold plate, reflecting popular devotion to her as a protector of sight⁵. Hospitals and clinics have been dedicated to her name around the world. Lucy, as we saw, in addition to being venerated for eye problems, it is noted that she saved Syracuse on several occasions in times of famine, earthquakes, and wars and that she has also intervened in other cities such as Brescia, Italy, since thanks to her intercession, it was freed from great misery. The devotees of Saint Lucy, as gratitude for cures, offer her, as an offering in fulfillment of a promise or in gratitude for a favor received, eyes of gold or silver and prayer that says: "full of confidence, we turn to you asking for the grace that ours remain healthy and that the use we make of our eyes is always for the good of our soul..."⁴

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

1. González-Hernando I. The legend of Lucy of Syracuse. Consultado abril4, 2020. Disponible en: https://www.eldrbarry.net/mous/saint/luc_bro.pdf
2. North W. The Life and Prayers of Saint Lucy of Syracuse. Wyatt North Publishing. 2010.
3. Ortiz-Hidalgo C. Águeda de Catania: santa patrona de las enfermedades de la glándula mamaria. *Gac Med Mex*. 2011;147:437-43.
4. Goes F. Saint Lucy and other saints of the blind. En: *The eye in history*. New Dehli: Jaypee-Highlights Medical Publishers; 2013. p. 306-09.
5. Arias J. El cuerpo momificado de santa Lucía, robado en Venecia a punta de pistola. Disponible en: https://elpais.com/diario/1981/11/10/sociedad/374194803_850215.html
6. Barbón-García JJ, Álvarez-Suárez ML. Santa Lucía a través de la pintura. *Arch Soc Esp Oftalmol*. 2003;78:689-92.