



SANTA LUCIA

Canada's First Saint's Day Celebration?

"He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord;"
– Romans 14:6

It began in the darkest hours of the morning of December 13th, in the years before the Great Schism of 1054 divided Sweden from the Orthodox Church. A young woman wearing a white gown, a red sash and a crown of lingonberry twigs and blazing candles emerges out of the darkness carrying a tray of rich saffron buns and steaming coffee to wake the family.

Throughout Sweden the feast day of Santa Lucia, or Saint Lucy, is celebrated as a festival of lights. The Lucia Queen, or *Lussibruden* (Lucy Bride) leads the processions. The tradition of honouring Saint Lucy came originally from Germany and speculates that the festival was originated in Sweden by Vikings who traveled south on expeditions to Italy and brought back the stories of the Christian martyr, Lucia. Ironically, it is these same Norse explorers who also went *a'viking* (raiding) across the Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, and the Newfoundland settlement at Lance Aux Meadows who may have celebrated the festival of Saint Lucy as the first major saint's day on Canadian soil.

As early as the sixth century, Saint Lucy was venerated in Rome as a virgin martyr; her Life as it is known today was written by the western Orthodox Saint Aldhelm of Sherborne at the end of the seventh century. Her original feast day (the day of her martyrdom) was on the solstice which was December 13 by the Julian calendar rather

than December 21 which it became with the change to the Gregorian calendar in the 1300s, linking it with the far older Yule and Winter festivals of pre-Christian times.

There are two well-known legends attributed to "Santa Lucia". At one time Sweden was in the grip of a terrible famine and at the height of winter when things were their worst a ship sailed across Lake Vannern with a beautiful young woman dressed all in white at its helm. She was so radiant that there was a glow of light about her head. It was Saint Lucia with a shipload of food. In Syracuse the people were in the midst of a famine and they gathered in the cathedral to implore God to help in the name of Saint Lucia. A ship loaded with wheat sailed into the harbor as they prayed. This is the explanation given for the *cuccidata*, or cooked wheat which is an ingredient in many festival foods in Italy. Similar porridges and puddings are also prepared for friends, family and visitors in Northern European and Scandinavian homes - likely in connection with the blessing of wheat (or *kolivo*) for the feast day of a saint in Orthodox parishes today.

Young women in Sweden to this day go from one house to the next carrying torches or candles to light their way, bringing baked goods, stopping to visit a bit at each house and returning home by break of day. The young women wear candles in crowns festooned with lingonberry leaves and candles, a custom that still persists (although the crowns are now often electric lights).

Saint Lucia's martyrdom reflects the common experience of numerous virgin martyrs of the early centuries of the Christian faith. Rejecting both impurity of life and lawful marriage from her youth, Saint Lucia chose a life totally dedicated to Our Lord and Saviour, a choice borne witness to in the white garment she wears. A victim of torture by pagans who put out her eyes, she also bears witness to true, spiritual sight, and the True Light of Christ she continued to follow, even in her imposed physical blindness. (Her icon often bears an image of her carrying a plate of small cakes; these are euphemistic substitutions for the images of two eyes on a platter found in earlier icons).

In this way, Saint Lucia is an ideal patron for young women in modern society, an image of purity and chastity preserved amid an age of corruption and temptation, and an image of one who maintains an unwavering vision of Christ among those whose spiritual eyes are truly blind to God.

Just as Saint Catherine shows us the difference between worldly learning and heavenly wisdom, Saint Lucia emulates true love and virtue in an age dominated by romantic delusion, and true Orthodox Christian faith in an age dominated by spiritual blindness.

Holy Saint Lucia, pray for us!

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