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THE CULT OF SAINT AGATHA

By Liana De Girolami Cheney

*My soul has within it whole breasts, and with
Them I nourish all my senses, which I have
Consecrated to the Lord from infancy.¹*

The history of the cult of Saint Agatha (231-51) can be studied from three perspectives: first, by analyzing the limited sources concerning the history of the saint's martyrdom; second, by commenting on her trial; and third, by examining the Mannerist fresco cycle depicting her martyrdom, by Giulio Campi, in the church of Saint Agatha in Cremona.

Saint Agatha, a patron of the royal city of Catania, Sicily, died in prison during the persecution of the Christians ordered by King Decius (ruled 249-51). Decius had murdered his predecessor, Philip. In order to make it appear that Philip was killed because he was a Christian rather than as a power play, he ordered an empirewide persecution of Christians and made Quintianus King of Sicily. Quintianus fell in love with Agatha, a great beauty of noble birth who had dedicated her virginity to Christ. Under the pretext of possessing her and her noble patrimony, he invoked imperial edicts of persecution against Christianity. When Agatha refused his sexual advances and objected to handing over to him her family wealth, he subjected her to all types of indignities, including sending her to the house of Aphrodisia, who kept a brothel. She remained stalwart and Quintianus ordered her beaten, then had her breasts shorn. However, she was miraculously healed by Saint Peter. The vengeful Quintianus subsequently had her further tortured with burning coals and fire. She was then sent to prison, where she died.² Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) elevated her to sainthood in the sixth century and established February 5th as her feast day. She was one of the church's first female martyrs.³

The early cult of Saint Agatha is recorded in several Greek and Latin versions, but the Greek is the oldest. Of the Latin martyrologies, the first was *Hieronymianum* (Martyrology of Jerome), which relates that Saint Agatha was martyred at Catania on February 5, 251. Her name appears in the calendar of the church of Carthage (530), the *Synaxarion* (collection of saints' lives) of the Greek church, the canon of the Roman Mass, Venantius Fortunatus's *Carmina* (Songs), and in both the Gelasian and the Gregorian *Sacramentaries* (collections of texts used for liturgical rites). The text of the *passio* (a narrative account of a martyr's suffering) establishes the dramatic confrontation between Agatha and Quintianus. The cult was strongly supported by Pope Gregory the Great, who reconsecrated a fifth-century Arian basilica to her in the Subura district of Rome.⁴ A letter from Pope Hadrian I (772-95) to Charlemagne informs us that Gregory ordered this church, S. Agata dei Goti, decorated with scenes in mosaic and fresco.⁵ We also know from Hadrian's famous letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles that Gregory favored the use of religious images, particularly narratives, for their pedagogical value. Gregory's view became the classic expression of the Western attitude toward religious art: that images not be suppressed "so that the illiterate will at least read by looking at the walls. It is one thing to adore images and another to learn through the story represented by the image what one must adore."⁶

The popularity of Saint Agatha during the early Middle Ages

was assured by Jacobus de Voragine, who included an account of her life in his *Legenda Sanctorum* or *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend).⁷ In the prologue of the *Life of Saint Agatha*, the 15th-century scholar Osbern Bokenham analyzed five meanings Voragine associated with the appellation "Agatha": the first meaning refers to "God's holy," because etymologically *hagios* signifies holy and *theos* God; therefore, the origin of her name reflects her moral behavior—chastity of heart, abundance of good works, and presence of the Holy Spirit. Voragine also proposed a meaning that comes from the word *a-geos*: *a* signifies without, and *geos* earth, alluding to the lack of earthly desires on the part of Saint Agatha. (I would add that perhaps *ageos* also refers to her lack of breasts, since both breasts and the earth provide nutriment for the living.) Voragine's third meaning comes from *aga* or speaking and *thau* or ending, referring to her eloquent rhetoric during her persecution trial. The fourth refers to *agad* or servitude, which, when associated with *theos*, alludes to Agatha's service as a Christian follower or imitator of Christ. The last interpretation deals with *aga*, meaning solemn, and *thav*, referring to consummation, such as her noble and somber martyrdom, a symbol of the Christian faith, love, and patience. These meanings attest to Agatha's spiritual integrity as well as her moral and valiant actions as a Christian and a woman.⁸

Three important recent studies have shed further light on the cult of Saint Agatha and on Catania's church of Saint Agatha: Santo D'Arrigo's comments on the trial of Saint Agatha, Magdalena Carrasco's research on the tenth-century manuscript of the *passio* of Saint Agatha at the Bibliothèque National in Paris, and Nerida Newbigin's analysis of the *sacre rappresentazioni* (holy plays), or *passio*.⁹

D'Arrigo establishes Agatha's dates: She was born in 231 in Catania and died 20 years later, during the third Decian consulate; her body is presently buried in the church of Saint Agatha in Catania.¹⁰ Most significantly, D'Arrigo documents the legal confrontation between Quintianus and Agatha, presenting Agatha not only as a martyr but as an eloquent defender of her faith. Much of the text consists of extended passages of conversation between Quintianus and Agatha. Instead of shrinking back from her accuser, Agatha stands as a confident and aggressive defender of Christianity.

Although Agatha's defiant refusal angered Quintianus, her intelligence and eloquence during the trial attest to her intellectual and cultural training as a *nobil donna*. D'Arrigo contextualizes the education of women and the laws that governed them during the rulership of Emperor Trajan (98-117). During her schooling in Catania, Agatha benefited from the Roman law that encouraged and nurtured classical education, even for young girls. She studied with Valerio Liciniano, a renowned scholar who tutored her in the art of rhetoric.¹¹ The significance of Agatha's classical education is demonstrated during her trial as noted in the Greek manuscript on the life of Saint Agatha, *Acta Sanctorum* (a collection of saints' lives).¹² This ancient commentator here relates how Aphrodisia and her nine daughters argued for a month with Agatha to reedu-



Fig. 1. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Saint Agatha* (1519), oil on canvas. Pitti Palace, Florence.
Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

cate her and persuade her to change her ideas. Agatha's sophisticated education, intelligent reasoning, and noble background proved an insurmountable barrier.

D'Arrigo explains how Tertullian, who lived during the time of Saint Agatha, recounts in *De virginibus velandis* (On the Veiling of Young Women) that women of the Christian community divided themselves into two groups: the virgins of men and the virgins of God.¹³ Those in the latter group consecrated their lives to Christ, pledging chastity and a virginal life. At her trial Agatha constantly restated that she was "virgo Deo dicta." She insisted on dressing in the style of those "virgins consecrated to God," which was similar to slave attire.¹⁴ Furthermore, D'Arrigo notes that during her interrogation Agatha accused Quintianus of violating her legal rights as a noblewoman, to which Quintianus replied that since she was dressed as a slave, she could not be a noblewoman. There was an intense battle between them on the issue of idolatry, with Quintianus insisting that Agatha sacrifice to and adore pagan gods. In anger, Agatha compared his wife to Venus and Quintianus to Jupiter, a blasphemous and abhorrent comment for a pagan believer.¹⁵ The Latin text of the *Acta Sanctorum* records Agatha's protest against Quintianus's tortures: "Don't you feel remorse for shearing the breasts of this woman? These are the same breasts you sucked!"¹⁶

According to D'Arrigo's interpretation of the *Acta Sanctorum*, when Saint Peter visited Agatha in prison and told her of his wish to restore her breasts, he expressed hope that she would not feel shame or embarrassment. Agatha replied: "How could I feel shame before you? You are already an old man. And then, though I am a young woman my body is so lacerated that my own scars do not allow any sexual or sensual stimuli to arouse me; therefore, my spirit cannot feel any sense of embarrassment."¹⁷ The following day, when Agatha appeared in court, Quintianus asked her who had cured her breasts; she declared that Christ, her God had

healed her. The furious Quintianus tried to force her to sacrifice to idols. When she refused, he ordered her body to be burned over live coals.

During the early Roman period women of legal age could defend themselves when an *actio popularis* (public offense) was committed against them.¹⁸ Women who owned property and had a noble title could at age 18 appear in court and claim the power to defend themselves legally. During the Decian period the persecution of the Christians had diminished. Thus Quintianus had abused his power when he arrested and brutally tortured Agatha for professing Christianity. Quintianus evoked the then-defunct Roman persecution law to punish Agatha for rejecting him. When Agatha's legal defense demonstrated her innocence and Quintianus's wrongdoing, the jury found in her favor and the people of Catania sought the lynching of

Quintianus; however, he drowned in the river while attempting to escape.

After the 13th century, ironically, a trial like Agatha's was no longer possible because of the judicial concept of *pudor sexus*, a legal term for sexual shame or embarrassment. According to 16th-century lawyer-theologian Domenico Bruni, *pudor sexus* meant that a woman should not be required by law to defend herself in court. Because of her *honestas* (honesty or virginity) and *infirmetas sexus* (weaker gender), "she is not liable for any kinds of wrongdoing."¹⁹ Although Bruni's law was in some ways beneficial to women, it was also discriminatory since it required that "a man should represent her affairs and organize her life according to her talents." Thus the privilege of self-defense exercised by the valiant Agatha and other noblewomen was prohibited after the 13th century. However, exceptions to this ruling have been documented in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the cases of Properzia de' Rossi and Artemisia Gentileschi, respectively, each of whom defended her honor in court.²⁰

D'Arrigo's study of the legal issues surrounding Saint Agatha's trial attests to her nobility, virtue, and spiritual strength, as well as her ability to overcome carnal brutality and political power. This trial also demonstrates the need of Christianity to evoke such a legend to instruct the female faithful.

Nerida Newbigin names the two factors responsible for the resurgence of interest in porno-violent hagiography that occurred at the end of the 15th century: the new technology of printing and the fanatical, propagandistic attitude of Savonarola and the Dominicans of San Marco in Florence. Newbigin eloquently demonstrates that although the printed *sacre rappresentazioni* were the 15th-century equivalent of modern pulp literature, the aim of such works was still primarily pious: "devotion required stronger and more sensual stimuli in a society which combined extremes of piety and violence with a taste of the miraculous."²¹

Interest in the performance of sacred plays, or *passio*, during the 15th century again brought to light the martyrdom of Saint Agatha.²² The enactment of those sacred plays, although popularized in Florence, also took place in the northern cities of Italy, including Cremona.

With the advent of the printed *sacre rappresentazioni*, performance on a large scale almost ceased. Although it was thought that printing had caused the extinction, Newbiggin found that the printed texts were not for the most part the texts of the plays that were so praised by visitors to 15th-century Florence, but that publishers catered to the tastes of a new reading public.²³

The depiction of porno-violent hagiography continued into the 16th century and was augmented during the 17th-century Counter Reformation, as seen in the numerous representations of brutal martyrdoms (Saints Agatha, Catherine, and Cecilia) and biblical stories (Judith and Holofernes, Salome and Saint John the Baptist, and David and Goliath). In addition, this type of visual imagery was indirectly influenced by the writings of anatomical science and medical texts, which elaborated on the fragmentation of the human body.²⁴

Mervin Levin's recent study of the depiction of the female body points out that breast amputation was rarely portrayed in western European art before the twelfth century.²⁵ This might explain why few early images of Saint Agatha focus on her amputated breasts. An exception is the illuminated manuscript from the late-tenth century at the Bibliothèque National illustrating the *passio* of Saint Agatha.²⁶ By contrast, later representations of the theme, from the 14th through the 17th century, often emphasize the brutal martyrdom of the saint, for example, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Saint Agatha* of 1519 in the Pitti Palace (Fig. 1).

The iconography of Giulio Campi's Saint Agatha fresco cycle of 1537 in the church of SS. Agata e Margherita in Cremona (see inside covers) derives from conventional depictions of the legend from the Byzantine time to the Renaissance.²⁷ The early visual representations consisted of narrative cycles based on the saint's life. Later, during the Renaissance, artists added another type of representation, the single image, focusing usually on her martyrdom—Saint Agatha's breast being shorn. Traditional cycles consist usually of the following: Saint Agatha kneels before an altar; Quintianus falls in love with Agatha and wants to marry her; Agatha refuses to marry a pagan; angered by her rejection, Quintianus places Agatha in the brothel of Aphrodisia and her nine daughters; Aphrodisia tells Quintianus that nothing will move Agatha to accept him and his pagan faith; Quintianus brings Agatha to trial for refusing to adore pagan gods; Agatha's breasts are shorn; Saint Peter visits her in prison with an angel and heals her wounds; she is rolled naked on live coals; and the faithful mourn Agatha at her funeral.²⁸ Some cycles add posthumous episodes, such as Quintianus, after attempting to acquire her fortune, being bitten by a horse and drowning in a river; and Agatha's veil, carried in procession, stopping an eruption of Mount Etna.²⁹

In "The Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Saint Agatha," Carrasco expands our knowledge of the nature and sources of hagiography narrative illustration and discusses the passion of Saint Agatha through the tenth-century text and miniatures at the Bibliothèque National.³⁰ The miniatures appear to constitute the earliest surviving narrative cycle of the *passio* and are based on early Christian and Carolingian sources. However, the hagiographic origins can be traced to programs commissioned after the sixth century by Gregory the Great for the church of S. Agata dei Goti in Rome.³¹

The singular appearance of an extended cycle of Saint Agatha's *passio* raises the question of its iconographic sources. In early

Christian and Byzantine art, Saint Agatha is depicted as a single, isolated frontal figure. In the church of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, she appears richly dressed and bearing a diadem or cross in the procession of female martyrs decorating the north wall of the nave.

Similar representations occur later in the Middle Ages. Saint Agatha appears as the figure initial "I" in the Gelasian *Sacramentaries* from the end of the eighth century, and in a lectionary from Saint Martial Limoges, dating to the late-tenth or early-eleventh century.³² With the exception of the manuscript at the Bibliothèque National discussed by Carrasco, illustrations of Agatha's mutilation do not appear in the West until the twelfth century. As in the East, the only episode to have been accorded frequent and detailed treatment is the removal of the breast, often elaborated to include both breasts, but none is identical to the Paris *passio*. An early example is found in a German passionary from the early-twelfth century, now in Stuttgart, which illustrates Saint Agatha suspended from a rectangular structure while the torturer removes her right breast with pincers. Similar scenes appear sporadically in twelfth-century manuscript illumination. The earliest known full narrative cycle of the passion of Saint Agatha in the West is found in a Spanish picture bible from Pamplona, created at the start of the 13th century. Based on a 13th-century panel painting by an anonymous painter of Cremona, it illustrates Saint Agatha's life and fuses the Byzantine and Medieval stylistic and iconographic traditions, thus creating a prototype imagery for Italian Renaissance depictions.³³

Scenes of Saint Agatha's martyrdom appear sporadically in psalters, antiphonaries, breviaries, books of hours, stained glass windows, and occasionally in monumental painting and sculpture. George Kaftal's *Iconography of the Saints in the Paintings of Italy* illustrates the various representations of Saint Agatha from the 13th to the 15th century in Lombardy, Tuscany, and southern Italy.³⁴ For instance, in Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence there is a single panel of Saint Agatha, dating from the 13th century; two episodes from her life are depicted in a 14th-century fresco cycle in the church of Saint Agatha in Arfoli at Valdarno. In southern Italy, the cycle in Castoreale, Sicily, dated 1420, shows Venetian stylistic influences.

In Lombardy, Simone Baschenis's frescoed cycles of Saint Agatha in the 14th-century Bolzano cathedral have been ruined; still extant are the Saint Agatha panels in the church of Castel San Pietro (1345), and the 14th-century panel at the church of San Biagio in Bellinzona. These representations attest to the spread of the cult of Saint Agatha by the Lombard school.

In the early visual tradition, Saint Agatha's attributes were the shorn breast (or breasts) placed on a platter, symbol of



Fig. 2. Giulio Campi, *Saint Agatha Is Burned on Live Coals* (1537), drawing. Cabinet des Dessins, The Louvre. Photo: The Louvre.

her martyrdom; the pincers or shears, instrument of her martyrdom; and a palm, symbol of her sainthood. However, other attributes, for example, a candle or a house in flames (recalling her ordeal by fire), were added after the 14th century. She thus became the patron saint of fire, having been invoked against fire after her burial, particularly during the eruptions of Mount Etna (see the German Master of Messkirch's *Saint Agatha*, 1520, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and *Saint Agatha Holding a Burning Church* in Saint George, Dinkelsbühl, by an unknown Northern Renaissance painter).

Because of the popular merrymaking legend related to ancient pagan festivals that accompanied her cult in Sicily, she was also invoked against diseases of the breast, thus becoming the patron saint of nurses. Sometimes Saint Agatha is the protector of Alpine guides, bell-founders, and miners, the inverted breast(s) suggesting the shapes of bells and hills. She also became the patron saint of bakers, her breasts on the plate having been mistaken for loaves of bread, leading to the practice of blessing bread on her feast day.

Giulio Campi's frescoed cycle is among the more elaborate from 16th-century northern Italy. The choir walls of SS. Agata e Margherita in Cremona contain selected scenes of the martyrdom: *Saint Agatha's Breasts Are Shorn* (inside front cover, left), *Saint Peter Heals Saint Agatha in Prison* (inside front cover, right), *Saint Agatha Is Burned on Live Coals* (inside back cover, left), and *Saint Agatha Is Buried* (inside back cover, right). An inscription on the marble slab in the last scene honors her faith: "Mentem sanctam spontaneam honorem deo dedit et patriae liberationem fecit (She gave to God willingly her mind and honor and provided freedom for her native land)." Campi honors the female heroine by painting her life story. He also honors himself by signing and dating the work, Julius Campus Faciebat, MDXXXVII, at the base of the pilasters next to the saint's burial scene.

Amidst the decorative splendor of Mannerist architectural stage settings—elaborate pilasters enhanced with classical motifs and friezes with floral festoons and bucrania—the dramatic story of Saint Agatha's agony unfolds. Campi focuses on two aspects of human response: judgment and empathy. He portrays Saint Agatha's noble comportment in dealing with her painful ordeals, behavior the viewer is encouraged to emulate. Human weakness is shown in the actions of Quintianus, the executioners, and onlookers. Without reducing the Christian significance of the martyrdom into sado-masochism, Campi presents an elaborate and sumptuous, even delightful frame for the unfolding story of Saint Agatha—the physical pain is sublimated by visual beauty, a Mannerist conceit. By surrounding the gruesome martyrdom with elegant details, Campi distracts the viewer from the violence.

Campi's source of inspiration for the narrative scene is a *tavola* (panel painting) in the church of SS. Agata e Margherita, painted on both sides by an unknown master of the late-12th or the early-13th century. The recto depicts a Madonna and Child and the verso the martyrdom of Saint Agatha, focusing on the miraculous event of Saint Peter restoring the saint's severed breasts. Surrounding the large scenes are small scenes narrating the legend of the saint: at top, *The Temptation* (or *Agatha in the House of Aphrodisia*), *The Trial*, *The Flagellation*, *The Amputation of the Breasts*; at the bottom, *The Trial by Fire*, *The Earthquake*, and *The Miracle of the Veil*.³⁵

Campi's fresco cycle consists of only four scenes. In the first, *Saint Agatha's Breasts Are Shorn*, a reclining boy points to the torment while turning away from the scene. Members of the judicial court gesticulate and view the cruel event with agitation. Some art historians claim Saint Agatha's breasts allude to the symbol of "motherhood, and its attributes of love, nourishment, and protec-

tion."³⁶ For others, the breast is a symbol of both protection and measurability. According to the Hebraic tradition the word *bath* means both girl and measure, thus the breast is connected with "the female principle of measurability contrasting with the male principle which is immeasurable."³⁷ Here Saint Agatha's breasts represent a symbol of balance and justice or fair dealing, while Quintianus's mandate to sever them alludes to the opposite, injustice and wrongdoing; thus he violates the divine and natural laws. The pincers used by Saint Agatha's executioners have become attributes of her martyrdom.³⁸

In this first scene, a tiny painting on the upper-left wall illustrates the Conversion of Saul. Below it is the only figure who turns from the scene, his gaze averting the viewer—probably Quintianus. The pairing is intentional: Saul's persecution of others blinded him, and until his conversion he could not receive Christian grace; in the same manner, Quintianus, too, is blinded by his human passions and weaknesses. The viewer may wonder if Quintianus will see the light and convert as Saul did. By contrast, Saint Agatha here receives the grace of God; the sky above opens up to allow entrance to an angel carrying a crown to honor God's martyr.

The pilaster dividing this scene from the next, *Saint Peter Heals Saint Agatha in Prison*, contains two medallions with the inscription *Sic E A.M.* (Here is Agatha as martyr) and *Sic V S.O.S* (Here is your salvation), inviting the viewer to follow her courage as Christ had done during His flagellation and torments. These first two scenes are united by a continuous background suggesting that it is a stormy night. Saint Peter, as the healing Christ, stands outside Saint Agatha's prison cell offering her an ointment bowl. Roman soldiers, with their weapons and shields—one decorated with a Medusa-head—surround Saint Peter. However, they become impotent and petrified by the miraculous healing.

Saint Agatha's strength parallels that of the massive column behind the soldiers in the center of the painting. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, the column has cosmic and spiritual meanings, representing trees of life as well as pillars of light.³⁹ The column of light assists the faithful to be united with God by emanating divine light and grace. As illustrated in Campi's night scene, there are two types of light: the divine, which emanates from the column, and natural, which is created by the flaming torch carried by Saint Peter's young assistant to illuminate Saint Agatha in jail. The parallelism between Christ and Saint Agatha follows the Early Christian conventions on the *imitatio Christi*.⁴⁰ For Christians, martyrdom was received with joy as a special grace, making it possible for a follower to be united in Christ.

These two scenes allude to Christian faith through courage and fortitude as shown by Saint Agatha. Campi selected specific attributes to illustrate faith: the column (fortitude), crown (reward for martyrdom), and the roaring lion's head (courage) in the decorative festoons on the frieze above the paintings. In addition, the virtue of justice is symbolized by Saint Agatha's breasts; the two types of light, divine and natural, represent a source of spiritual illumination; and the Latin inscriptions in the medallions are reminders of social and moral responsibilities. Moreover, the column also refers to the pillars that sustained King Solomon's Temple, contrasting with the hall of injustice in Quintianus's court of law, and foretelling the Last Judgment, where all unjust acts will be punished and just and courageous deeds rewarded.

The third scene of the cycle, *Saint Agatha Is Burned on Live Coals*, depicts another trial. Kneeling in front of the burning coals, Agatha implores for divine intervention. Soldiers and executioner surround her in the foreground; and above, on a terrace, onlookers gesticulate, some pleading for mercy. In the background uprooted trees show the storm's power, contrasting with the orb-topped

pyramid, which stands firm. According to the ancient philosopher Hermes Trismegistus, the tip of the pyramid symbolizes the first-born power, emanating from God and ruling all created things.⁴¹ This concept is illustrated in the painting as the orb on the pyramid appears to direct the storm or rain, preventing the burning of Saint Agatha. Her prayers have been answered; her request for God's help has been granted.

A surviving drawing from the fresco cycle is from this third scene (Fig. 2). Originally included in Giorgio Vasari's *Libro dei Disegni* (Book of Drawings), and now in The Louvre, it is drawn with black-and-white ink on green paper.⁴² In the painting Campi replaced the horsemen carrying a banner with a standing soldier holding a lance and used fewer figures around the female saint.

The last scene in the fresco, *Saint Agatha Is Buried*, takes place inside a church, where the body of the saint has been placed in a sarcophagus. One angel holds a plaque honoring the martyr while others hold her veil, a symbol of her modesty and chastity. Saint Agatha's veil also refers to her miracle of saving the Catanian people by deviating a large flow of lava from Mount Etna.⁴³

In the foreground, to the right of the reclining body of the saint, mourning priests pay homage to the martyr, some chanting. One priest holds a music book, alluding to Cremona's fame as a city of music making and instrument makers. Another clergyman shakes a censer with burning incense. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the censer symbolizes pleas for God's acceptance of the faithful's prayers: "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense" (Psalm 141:2).⁴⁴

In the cupola of the apse is a scene of the Sacrifice of Abraham, an Old Testament prefiguration to Saint Agatha's New Testament sacrifice. Both holy figures—Abraham and Saint Agatha—act in good faith and obedience toward God. And in both instances God intervenes and rewards these holy figures for their leap of faith. He sends an angel to Abraham to prevent him from murdering his son. He sends Saint Peter to heal Agatha. Campi continues this parallelism of heroic and just conduct in the medallions of the pilaster, which depict David slaying Goliath and Saint Michael the Archangel, both heroic warriors and defenders of their faith.⁴⁵ A medallion containing a peacock is placed between these Old and New Testament images. King Solomon refers to the peacock, symbol of prudence and protector (I Kings 10:22), as David. In Christian iconography, the peacock is associated with love, immortality, and Resurrection because his flesh was incorruptible, even after burial. Saint Michael the Archangel's association with this symbolism relates to his role as announcer of the Resurrection of the flesh on the Last Judgment day.⁴⁶

Campi shows again his inventiveness and whimsy in the festoon decoration, where he places a bucrania, an ancient symbol of



Fig. 3. Bernardino Luini, *Saint Agatha* (1510-15), oil on panel. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

death and immortality corresponding to the scene below—the death of Saint Agatha. Like his 16th-century colleagues, Campi also fuses classical motifs with Christian symbolism.

The Campi cycle illustrates the text of the *passio* where Saint Agatha confronts and surpasses her physical trials. Agatha's virtues—beauty, virginity, dedication to Christ, and noble birth—are counterpointed to Quintianus's greed, lust, impiety, and intolerance of Christians. Agatha's heroism exemplifies a Christian Amazon, or *virago*. Margaret King explains that *virago* refers to a "female military hero who achieves equivalence, or indeed eminence, in the world by becoming not a greater woman, but, as it were, a man (*vir*)."⁴⁷ Saint Agatha's physical and spiritual beauty become a threat for Quintianus because, like the Amazons, she has chosen to defy, even deny, her own sexuality. Both yield to physical dismem-

berment for heroic reasons. The dismemberment is a form of both disintegration and reintegration in the martyrdom for Saint Agatha, where the mutilation occurs as a sacrifice in defense of Christianity; for the Amazon the amputation of a breast facilitates physical mobility as well as self-protection during battle.

Through Campi's paintings, the 16th-century theologians of the church of SS. Agata e Margherita who commissioned the cycle sought to document Agatha's audacious dedication to Christ and the inevitable triumph of her faith. Campi's cycle was imitated by other artists, among them Gismondo Cerrini, whose 1630 fresco cycle in the church of S. Agata dei Goti, Rome, replaced the sixteenth-century cycle, and Plantania and Corradino Romano's 1628 cycles in the cathedral of Catania.

In addition to fresco cycles, many artists have depicted single images from the Saint Agatha legend, for example, her bearing her shorn breasts in a salver or holding a palm frond and a knife. Bernardino Luini, the Milanese painter and follower of Leonardo da Vinci, depicted her triumphantly holding a chalice on which are displayed her shorn breasts (1510-15; Fig. 3), and Parmigianino, in *Saint Agatha and Her Tormentors* (1529; S. Giovanni Battista, Parma), represents the glory of her martyrdom.

Although few in number, some 16th-century Italian easel paintings focus on the executioner's action, as does Sebastiano del Piombo's violent, colorful *Saint Agatha* (Fig. 1), commissioned by Cardinal Ercole Ragone to celebrate his elevation to the cardinalate. (His titular church was Saint Agatha in Rome).⁴⁸ Del Piombo creates a *virago* image of Saint Agatha, paralleling her sacrifice to Christ's flagellation and suffering. The artist has composed a three-quarter view of the scene, focusing on her torso. The frontality of the body suggests an *Ecce Homo* presentation. Saint Agatha's martyrdom is offered to the Christian viewer for mercy or conversion, as a reminder of Christ's flagellated body presented to the Roman and Jewish masses in Jerusalem.

Sebastiano del Piombo's *Saint Agatha* foretells the martyrdom images created during the Counter Reformation of the next century.⁴⁹ Yet, it was Giulio Campi, in his elaborate fresco cycle, who reintroduced the cult and legend by immortalizing the full extent of Saint Agatha's martyrdom and Christian triumph. Saint Agatha's agony is conquered by her courage to be healed through her leap of faith. The narrative scenes and *passio* of the saint evoke with vigor and vivid representation both the suffering and the faith of Christianity. ●

NOTES

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1. Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Sanctorum* or *Legenda Aurea* (c.1288), trans. and adapted from the Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno, 1969), 157-62. For a more recent version of *The Golden Legend*, see William Granger Ryan, trans. and ed., I (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), xiii.

2. There are several legends related to the life of Saint Agatha. The best known are Voragine, *Legenda Sanctorum* and Osborn Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women* (1443-47?), trans. and intro. by Sheila Delany, *A Legend of Holy Women* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame-Indiana, 1992), 157-67. See also Clara Erskine Clement, *A Handbook of Christian Symbols and Stories of the Saints* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1886), 42-44; Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 594-98; and Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982).

3. F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1984), 23-24; W. J. MacDonald, ed., *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1967), 146-97; and John J. Delaney, *Dictionary of Saints* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 30.

4. L. Duchesne, ed., *Liber Pontificalis* I, II (Paris, 1886) and P. Ewald, et al., eds., *Gregorii Papae Registrum Epistularum* (Paris, 1891), 1-253. In ancient Roman times the Subura district was the section of the city located below the Palatine: *sub antiqua urbe*.

5. Hadrian I's letter has been reproduced in *MGH Epistolarum* 5, *Epistole Karolini* (1898-99; reprint Berlin: Weidmann, 1974), 3-50. See A. M. Bernardi, *San' Agata dei Goti* (University of Bologna, unpublished dissertation, 1965/1966) for an extensive bibliography on the history of this church, which went through many restorations. None of the original mosaics and frescoes survive. In the 17th century a clerestory replaced the triforium of the nave, and the deteriorating Early Christian fresco cycle of Saint Agatha was replaced in 1630 by six paintings on canvas by Gismondi Cerrini, pupil of Pietro da Cortona, depicting scenes from her life: in the house of Aphrodisia, refusing to adore pagan images, the martyrdom, Saint Peter appearing to her in jail, being rolled on burning coals, and her death. Presently, the fresco cycle is being restored.

6. P. Ewald, et al., eds., *Gregorii Papae Registrum Epistularum* (Paris, 1891), 1-253, and J. P. Minge, ed., "Gregorii M. Dialogorum," Book III, in *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1849).

7. Among the other popular virgin martyrs included by Voragine in *The*

Golden Legend are Agnes, Apollonia, Barbara, Catherine of Alexandria, Cecilia, Christina, Domitilla, Dorothy, Katherine, and Eufemia.

8. Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women*, 157.

9. Santo D'Arrigo, *Il Martirio di Sant' Agata* (Catania: Università di Catania 1985); Magdalena Elizabeth Carrasco, "The Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Saint Agatha," *Gesta*, XXIV (1985), 19-32, Ms. Lat. 5594, Bibliothèque National, Paris; and Nerida Newbiggin, "Plays, Printing, and Publishing, 1485-1500: Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*," *Bibliofilia* (November 1988), 269-96.

10. D'Arrigo, *Il Martirio di Sant' Agata*, 15.

11. *Ibid.*, 45-62.

12. A. Bollandiani, ed., *Acta Sanctorum* (Paris, 1683-87), folio n. 999, p. 621, n. 5. (There are also translations from Antwerp, 1643-70; Brussels, 1680-86; and Venice, 1734-70).

13. D'Arrigo, *Il Martirio di Sant' Agata*, 66-82.

14. *Act Sanctorum*, folio 999, p. 615, n. 4.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 616, n. 5.

16. *Ibid.*, n. 8, verso 57.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 617, n. 9.

18. See P. Bonfante, *Istituzioni di Diritto Romano* (Instructions on Roman Law) (Rome, 1934), 57, and S. Di Salvo, *Lex Laetoria* (Latin Law) (Naples: Studi Universitari, 1979), 265.

19. Domenico Bruni da Pistoia, *Difese delle donne nella quale si contengono le difese loro, dalle calunnie datele per gli scrittori, e insieme le lodi di quella* (Women's defenses on their behavior according to writers who accused or praised them) (Milan, 1559), and Guido Rossi, "Statutes juridique de la femme," in *La Femme*, Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin, XII (Paris, n.d. 20th century), 131-32. See also, Constance Jordan, "Sex and Gender," *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1990), 126-72.

20. See Fredrika Jacobs, "The Construction of a Life: Madonna Properzia De' Rossi 'Schultrice' Bolognese," *Word and Image* (April-June, 1993), 1-11, and Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989), 403-88.

21. Newbiggin, "Plays, Printing, and Publishing, 1485-1500," 269-96. Almost all the *sacre rappresentazioni* printed before 1500 were published by Bartolomeo de' Libri and Antonio Miscomini.

22. De'Libri published an illustrated version on the martyrdoms and feasts of saints in 1490, in Florence. A woodcut (Fig. 10 in de'Libri's text) depicting The Feast of Saint Agatha Virgin and Martyr is designed with an elaborate floral border placed around the narrative scene. At the top of the page is a frieze containing two angels praying to a large cross flanked by two large candles in Mount Golgotha. The skull of Adam appears below the cross. The center of the page represents the consequences of Saint Agatha's trial, such as the cutting off of the breasts and burning by coals. Below this brutal scene, in a friezelike composition, three seated Church Fathers discuss the martyrdom.

23. *Ibid.*, 284.

24. See, for example, Michael Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1989).

25. Mervin Levin, *The Moons of Paradise: Some Reflections on the Appearance of the Female Breasts in Art* (London: Arthur Barker, 1962). See also Edward F. Lewison, "Saint Agatha: The Patron Saint of Diseases of the Breast in Legend and Art," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 24 (1950), 409-20, Fig. 9; Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pinton, eds., *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and the Visual Culture Since the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1993); and Cassandra Langer, "The Art of Healing: From the Pain and Devastation of Cancer, a Wellspring of Inspiration," MS. (January/February, 1989), 132-33. Langer discusses the work of sculptor Nancy Fried, who after her own mastectomy created nude self-images that recall the power and grandeur of the Amazons. Although in Greek art Amazon figures are never portrayed without breasts, Fried has

courageously done so. In ancient art the images of Amazons or female warriors are shown exposing one breast during battle. Legend has it that Amazons removed their right breast to hold with greater comfort the shield in battle. From this legend the Greeks named these warrior maidens *amazon*, meaning without a breast. See Elaine Fantham, et al., *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University, 1994), 128-34.

26. Carrasco, "The Early Illustrated Manuscript of the Passion of Saint Agatha," 19-32.

27. George Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in the Paintings of Italy: Central and Southern* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), 6-14, and H. von Wolfgang Braufels, *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* (Freiburg: Herder & Co., 1973), 44-47.

28. See Caroline Oates, "Metamorphosis and Lycanthropy in Frencehe-Comté, 1521-1643," in Feher, Naddaff, and Tazi, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 1304-63. Fig. 3, 316, is particularly interesting because it illustrates *The Execution of Peter Stumpf* from Johann Negel, *Warhafftige und wunderbarliche Neue Zeitung* (Augsburg, 1589). Peter Stumpf's first torment is the shearing of his breasts, followed by burning by coals, and terminating with decapitation. To my knowledge this is the first depiction of a man with shorn breasts in the 16th century. Obviously, this type of illustration represents the impact of the cult of Saint Agatha in northern Europe as well as the revival of martyrdom scenes during the Counter Reformation.

29. Karl Künstle, in *Ikonographie der Heiligen* (Freiburg: Herder & Co., 1926), 37-39, illustrates several images of Saint Agatha. His Fig. 6 shows a painting of Saint Agatha for the main altar of the Church of Saint George at Dinkelsbühl by an unknown Northern Renaissance painter depicting St. Agatha holding a burning church and staff in a landscape setting. In Fig. 7, at the museum of Schnutgen in Köln, an anonymous 16th-century Southern German sculptor represented Saint Agatha addressing the viewer and pointing her right finger to her breast while holding in her opposite hand a plaque with a breast-relief.

30. Carrasco, "The Early Illustrated Manuscript," 19-32.

31. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints*, 6-14.

32. Carrasco, "The Early Illustrated Manuscript," 24.

33. See Franco Voltini, "La Tavola di S. Agata in Cremona," in *Biblioteca Statale e Libreria Civica di Cremona* (Cremona: Linograf, 1979), 5-11, and Voltini, *Le Chiese di S. Agata*, 45-50.

34. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints*, 6-14. See Silvia Pasi, "La Tavola di S. Agata di Cremona," *Milione: Studi e ricerche d'arte bizantina* (Cremona: Biblioteca di Storia Patria, 1988), 351-59, for an updated bibliography and documentation on Italian Dugento and Trecento representations of Saint Agatha.

35. Pasi, "La Tavola," 351-59.

36. See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University, 1966), 36, 46, 102, and 183, for references to the attributes of Saint Agatha.

37. Werner Wolf, *Changing Concepts in the Bible* (New York: Random House, 1951), 235, also says that the right breast symbolizes the sun, and

the left the moon.

38. James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 248. Pincers, shears, or tongs are also an attribute of Saint Apollonia, whose teeth were removed by such a device.

39. *Ibid.*, 223-26.

40. W. Manson, "Martyrs and Martyrdom," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 39 (1957), 463-84.

41. *Ibid.*, 778.

42. Licia Ragghianti Collobi, *Il Libro de' Disegni del Vasari*, I (Bologna: Vallecchi, 1974), 140, and Fig. 245, II, questions the Vasarian provenance. However, I concur with Otto Kurz, "Giorgio Vasari's Libro dei Disegni," *Old Master Drawings* (June 1937), 1-15, and (December 1937), 322-44, that Campi's drawing was part of Vasari's collection.

43. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 325, reports that "after her death the city of Catania was threatened with destruction by a stream of molten lava which poured down from Mount Etna. The people of the city rushed to the tomb of Saint Agatha and, taking her silken veil, carried it upon a lance to meet the advancing river of fire. When the stream of lava met the sacred relic it turned aside, and the town was saved. Many were converted to Christianity by this miracle."

44. *Ibid.*, 163.

45. See JCJ Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 174, for a discussion on the role of Saint Michael as the preserver of the body and his association with Saint Gregory the Great, who placed above Hadrian's Tomb (Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome) a statue of Saint Michael carrying a sword, celebrating the end of the plague. Campi used this type of angel in his medallion.

46. *Ibid.*, 194, and Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University, 1995).

47. Margaret L. King, "Virgo et Virago," *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 192.

48. Michael Hirst, *Sebastiano del Piombo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). A study for the nude body of Saint Agatha is at the Cabinet des Dessins, The Louvre.

49. See, for example, Bernardo Cavallini, *Saint Agatha* (1640s; Detroit Institute of Arts); Francesco Guarino, *Saint Agatha* (1630; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford); Lorenzo Lippi, *Saint Agatha* (1630; Uffizi); Sebastiano Conca's pupil, Francesco Pennisi, *St. Peter Restoring Saint Agatha's Breasts* (1695; Cathedral of Catania); Francesco Gramignai, *Saint Agatha After the Shearing* (1768; The Basilica Collegiata of Catania); and, in the 18th century, G. B. Tiepolo, *Saint Agatha* (n.d.; Church of Saint Anthony, Padua).

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Giulio Campi, *Saint Agatha Is Burned on Live Coals* (1537), fresco. Choir, SS. Agata e Margherita, Cremona. Photo: G. Regis, Cremona.

Giulio Campi, *Saint Agatha Is Buried* (1537), fresco. Choir, SS. Agata e Margherita, Cremona. Photo: G. Regis, Cremona.



Giulio Campi, *Saint Agatha's Breast Is Shorn* (1537), fresco. Choir,
SS. Agata e Margherita, Cremona. Photo: G. Regis, Cremona.

Giulio Campi, *Saint Peter Heals Saint Agatha in Prison* (1537), fresco. Choir,
SS. Agata e Margherita, Cremona. Photo: G. Regis, Cremona.