





A Brief Conversion

November 22, 2017 Dan Morey

In honour of Saint Cecelia's feast day November 22, we offer you this essay by Dan Morey.

It isn't easy being a Lutheran in Rome. All those Baroque churches, slathered with marble sculptures, Madonna icons and gold mosaics, mix with the exotic scents of anointing oil and incense to cast an alluring spell. And then there are the saints. Catholics have patron saints for everything from fireworks (St. Barbara) to STDs (St. Fiacre), all with stories that typically end in gruesome deaths at the hands of Roman persecutors. As a Lutheran, I don't venerate saints, but in Italy they're hard to ignore. The cathedrals are full of paintings of tortured martyrs: Sebastian pierced by arrows, Cyriacus dismembered, Lawrence roasting on a grill.

It was during a visit to the Catacombs of Callixtus that I developed a very un-Lutheran interest in Cecelia, patron saint of music. In a lamplit crypt, deep in the subterranean tunnels, lies a ghostly white statue of the young martyr. She's lifeless on the floor, a cruel gash at the nape of her neck. Near the sculpture is a deteriorating fresco of a haloed Cecilia. The flaking plaster has deprived her of legs and a hand, but her radiant faith shines on.

When I returned to Rome, I Googled St. Cecelia at an internet café, and found out her feast day was November 22nd.

“That’s today!” I said.

This provoked an ornery shush from the proprietor, who was busy trimming his mustache. I Googled some more and saw that there was a vespers service at Santa Cecilia in Trastevere that evening, and that if I hurried I could make it. I rushed up to the register.

“Excuse me—”

“Shush.”

Apparently, mustache maintenance is an art that requires a high level of concentration. I waited as the man adjusted his hand mirror, selected a hair, and snipped it with exacting precision. His t-shirt was smeared with cigarette ash, and his matted locks resembled a rodent’s nest, yet he was intent on cultivating facial hair to rival Omar Sheriff’s. When he paused to admire the effect of his improvements, I tapped the counter and said, “How much for five minutes of Internet?”

Snip was his response. Snip, snip, snip.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess it’s gratis today.”

Gratis is a word that any merchant, on any continent, will immediately recognize.

“Whoa,” he said. “Give me euro.”

I paid him and headed for the river, crossing at Tiber Island where the old maternity hospital is. In a typical year some 4,500 babies are delivered there. On the west bank is Trastevere, a medieval neighborhood of cobbled streets. People were cramming into Santa Cecilia by the dozen when I arrived. The pews were full, so I waited outside in the garden, next to an enormous urn, for the service to start.

The church was built over the ruins of Cecilia’s house, and its crypt contains her relics, which were removed from the catacombs nearly 1,200 years ago. Cecilia, a victim of the Christian Persecutions, was arrested by a Roman prefect in the year

230. Her execution by steaming failed, so he tried beheading. It took three whacks and three days of bleeding out before she finally expired. Because she was singing praises to the Lord as she died, Cecilia became the patron saint of music.

When the vesper bells began to peal, I entered the church and stood in the back with the other latecomers. Everyone seemed to know each other; they hugged and kissed and chatted cheerfully.

Though the exterior of Santa Cecilia was given a neoclassical facelift in 1725, the interior still retains much of its medieval charm. The mosaics in the apse date to the ninth century, and the tall ciborium in the sanctuary resembles a Gothic tower on stilts.

Below this, guarded by golden angels, is Stefano Maderno's original sculpture of the martyred St. Cecilia (the one in the catacombs is a copy). She's so realistic that I watched her throughout the service, wondering if she might sit up and sing.

The choir, as expected on the feast day of the patron saint of music, performed admirably. At one point, a parishioner rose from his pew and played an excerpt from Handel's *Ode for Saint Cecilia's Day* on trumpet. It was beautiful. Everything about Catholicism—the music, the art, the vestments—was beautiful. How dour our Lutheran services seemed! How severe and unadorned were our churches!

After the ceremony, I went into the gift shop and bought a prayer card with a picture of Cecilia on the front. She's lovely and young, staring up to heaven as a burly executioner bears down on her with a sword.

I returned to the river, humming hymns the whole way. As I passed the hospital on Tiber Island, I asked St. Cecilia to bless all the little bambini and help them grow up to be saxophone virtuosos like Francesco Cafiso.

On the metro, I showed my prayer card to an old lady who smiled and crossed herself. "Cecilia is my favorite saint," I said. "Except I'm not supposed to have a favorite saint because I'm Lutheran. You won't tell, will you?"

The woman had no idea what I was saying, but she took out her rosary beads and let me rub them. When I got home, I told my mother I'd converted to Catholicism.

“It was only a matter of time,” she said. “You’ve always been very impressionable. What did it?”

I handed her my St. Cecilia card. “Patron saint of music,” I said.

“You know, I have a friend who sings in the choir at St. James. When we get back to Pennsylvania, I’ll tell her to sign you up.”

“Um.”

“You’ll get to go to every mass—seven or eight a week—and sing your little heart out.”

“Er.”

“Won’t St. Cecilia be proud?”

“What about Martin Luther?” I said. “You wouldn’t want me to disappoint him, would you?”

“It’s all the same to me, as long as you go to church.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do. And I know you’ll have lots of fun in confession, telling the priest all your sins.”

“Confession?”

“Of course—it’s part of the Catholic experience.”

I poured myself a glass of wine and thought it over. Before turning in, I told Mother I couldn’t convert. “I’d never forgive myself if I betrayed poor old Martin Luther like that.”

“What about Cecilia?”

“I’m keeping my prayer card just in case. You never know when you might need a little help from a saint.”

Photo header: Xuan Che, “[Martydom of Cecelia](#)”

About Dan Morey

Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He’s worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His creative work has appeared in *Clever Magazine*, *McSweeney’s Quarterly*, *Jersey Devil Press* and others. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com

