

**The Reemergence of the Cult of Saint Agatha in the Twelfth
Century:
The Immanence of the Sacred in Popular Catholic Belief**

A Thesis

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In August of 2014 I traveled to the South of Italy and Sicily to see ceremonial processions honoring the feast days of local patron saints in a few towns. The last ceremony I attended was in Catania and commemorated the day when the relics of Saint Agatha were taken back from Constantinople where they had been smuggled prior to the Muslim rule of the island. The ceremony I attended on the seventeenth of August began with a procession the night before in which Agatha's veil relic was carried out in its reliquary through the streets surrounding Catania's Duomo. Many citizens followed the procession as it stopped outside every nearby church where the bishop, carrying the veil, would say a few words in favor of the citizens of Catania and Saint Agatha as a symbol of the city (Appendix 1).

This procession was incomparable, however, to the one that followed the next morning. I walked from my hostel to the piazza outside the Duomo to find it completely filled with what seemed to be the city's entire population. I was quite surprised, as the night before had given me a different impression as to the level of emotional intensity related to Agatha's cult. Nonetheless, the piazza was now full to capacity and it seemed that most people were wearing uniforms signifying their membership in confraternities or women's societies based on Agatha's cult. People were waving handkerchiefs and crying as the bust of Agatha was carried out of the Duomo on its *fercolo* (similar to a litter) (Appendix 2). There were masses throughout the rest of the day and the other relics were on display, including her

breast. Although her breast now resembles a deteriorated, blackened piece of flesh, it was surrounded by a highly ornate glass reliquary with gold framing, and the citizens of Catania were lining up to kiss the glass one by one (Appendix 3).

The emotional vigor behind this event sparked my curiosity as to what the roots of the cult's significance were and what role these relics played in adding value to the ceremony. I focused my subsequent research on the cult's revival in the twelfth century, which was marked both by the arrival of the Normans in Sicily and by the return of Agatha's relics into Catania. While the political history of the island is complex and entrenched within its religious history, my experiences among the citizens themselves during the procession in August, led me to further explore what might have been involved in the cult's revival. I became particularly interested in the emphasis placed on the saint's relics, leading me to further explore the cultural meaning that had developed around holy objects in medieval Europe.

While few historians and scholars of religion study Agatha's cult, what has been written about the cult is often within the context of the Normans' conquest of Sicily in the twelfth century and the subsequent Christianization of the island. Scholars such as Paul Oldfield have tracked Agatha's cult throughout the Byzantine and Muslim rule of Sicily as well as into the Norman period, but minimal attention had been paid to the theological and psychological appeal of the cult separately from the political agendas that surrounded it throughout Sicilian history. I would like to argue, by contrast, that Agatha's cult did not reemerge in the twelfth century solely as a result of its ties to the Normans' political agenda, but rather that Agatha's narrative and the appearance of her relics reflected popular Christian theological

values of the time. The twelfth century marked a turning point in the practice and thought of popular Catholicism in that much more attention was given to the material world as it was thought to reflect the divine world.¹ As a result, there was a much stronger ritual importance placed on holy objects, particularly relics. As the most important female in Christian doctrine, the Virgin Mary became tied to the physical world rhetorically as well as through images and relics. Because the cult of the Virgin was re-popularized simultaneously with the cult of Agatha, there is room for a parallel to be drawn between the two female religious figures. I will therefore argue that Saint Agatha's cult was revived at a time when the Christian feminine ideal, which had been established by the cult of the Virgin, was structurally the same as that promoted by Agatha's narrative, leading to the successful revival of Agatha's cult.

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Agatha's Life and Legend

Saint Agatha was a young virgin who lived in Catania in the third century during the Roman reign of Decius. She was devoted to Christ and the bishop chose her, along with other young girls to wear a red veil or *flammeum* as a symbol of her

¹ Although Christianity always concentrated on ritual practices, it was not until the twelfth century and onward that such practices had become so emotional and physical, for they were to be based upon the spiritual model set out by figures such as Saint Francis and later Catherine of Siena whose experiences were centered on bodily expressions of the divine.

virginity. She was pursued by the Roman proconsul of Sicily, by the name of Quintian, who wanted to marry her, but she declared that she would only be the spouse of Christ. Out of anger towards her and her religion, he condemned her to be tortured and later, as she adamantly continued to uphold her Christian title, he put her in the prison attached to his palace. There she had a three-day trial during which Quintian continued to request that she abandon the Christian faith, but Agatha refused and became subject to more brutal torture including the severing of her breasts with a knife and hot pinchers.

Responding to her torture, Agatha still would not give up her faith and exclaimed, "Godless, cruel, infamous tyrant are you not ashamed to despoil a woman of that by which your own mother nursed you?"² Agatha was then thrown back into a jail cell where she received a vision of Saint Peter, who repaired her severed breasts. However, she remained in jail where she died of starvation and was martyred in 251. A year after Agatha's death, the nearby volcano Mount Etna erupted, and it was thought that she had miraculously protected the city from the lava. When Etna erupted again in 1190, Roger of Howden reported that Muslims went to the tomb of Agatha and held up her veil in order to deflect the lava and were subsequently converted.

Agatha's relics include her limbs, her veil, her bust, and one breast. The second breast is thought to have been left in the city of Taranto during the relics' retranslation in 1126. In his book *Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy*, Paul Oldfield provides information about the relics of Saint Agatha, the

² Antonio Scifo, *Saint Agatha The Patron of Catania: The Life, The Relics, The Sacred Places, The Festivity* (Sicily: Alma Editore, 2013), 17.

location of which before and during Muslim rule continues to be uncertain. Oldfield concludes: "...it seems that they [the relics] were absent from Catania for at least most of the eleventh century and a quarter of the twelfth."³ He cites Oderic Vitalis who chronicled the relics of Agatha between 1127 and 1130 and who asserts that the relics were removed by a Byzantine general named George Maniakes, in order to protect them from the Muslim presence. Oldfield notes that there is no evidence that the relics were in Catania or necessarily absent from the city either, by the year 1040. He also acknowledges the possibility that the relics were removed even earlier than this date. During the relics' absence and Muslim rule, the saint was more popular in Palermo, which happened to be her birthplace.

The Normans arrived in Sicily in 1090 bringing a stronger presence of Latin Christianity to an island where Byzantine Christianity had been more widespread prior to Muslim rule. The revival of Saint Agatha's Cult in the twelfth century might be looked at historically as a product of the Norman presence and their spread of Christianity, but it is important to consider the broader cultural context of the time period, acknowledging theological changes that might have influenced the role of the cult of the saints.

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Historical Background

³ Paul Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 143.

Due to its location in Sicily, Agatha's cult was influenced by a variety of cultures throughout the Middle Ages, making it more appealing to both the Latin and the Greek Churches as her narrative had been acquired by both canons. The Byzantine rule of Sicily, prior to Muslim rule, removed the island somewhat from the control of the Western Church, and in Pope Gregory's desperate efforts not to let it out of Rome's orbit completely, he continued to support the cults of the island's saints.⁴ Regardless of his efforts, Sicily became more tied to the Eastern Church and its saints were incorporated into Byzantine hagiography and lost by the Roman Church completely.⁵ Although Saint Agatha's first *passio* was written in Latin, her geographical ties to the East and later her cult's suppression by the Muslims kept her slightly out of reach of the Western Church until the Norman conquest of the island in 1090. However, the fact that the cult survived through Muslim rule means that it had maintained popularity within the Eastern Church in Sicily to some extent.

Christianity regained strength in Sicily with the onset of Norman rule, but remained suppressed by the other faiths that were still practiced on the island. There was no abrupt end to the practices of Muslim or Eastern Christian faiths by the Norman rulers; rather, figures such as Roger I were inclined to exercise religious tolerance in order to stay on good terms with such powerful groups as the Muslims, who were strong militarily. Adherents of these coexisting faiths would have had to take extra measures in order to maintain their religions' strength and appeal. Both consciously on a political level and subconsciously on a popular level, the emergence

⁴ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy* 37.

⁵ *Ibid* 40.

of saints' cults stands out as an obvious effort towards such a construction of institutional power on the part of the Christians. As Oldfield states (discussing the process through which the Normans Christianized Sicily), "The names of saints once again began to populate clearly the spiritual map of Sicily."⁶

The cult around Saint Agatha in Catania at the time was certainly no exception to this correlation between the cult of the saints and political power, but the assumption that its rise in popularity was solely a product of such a relationship is what I would like to contest throughout this paper as I take into account the variety of other factors which would have played a role in the enhancement of the saint's appeal. These factors include the arrival of the patron's relics into Catania in 1126. This event, without a doubt, added to the Normans' political power that was tied so closely to the cult, as the relics were indeed spiritual property--especially because they were supposedly native to the city. But this new presence of the sacred in material form would also have had an impact on the citizens of Catania spiritually and emotionally, in a way that can be analyzed separately from any political or colonial agenda. While these psychological factors were of course part of the mechanism of the Normans' political power, it is important to consider them separately.

That there were such factors active in the rise of Agatha's cult, separate from the political, becomes evident when one compares her cult with those other female saints' cults of the time. One might compare Agatha's hagiography and resulting popularity to that of Saint Lucy, who has often been placed by Agatha's side in texts

⁶ Ibid 146.

such as the Litany of the Saints and is the patron of Catania's neighboring city *Siracusa*. The popularity of Saint Lucy's cult during Sicily's re-Christianization came nowhere near that of Saint Agatha's, however. In fact, the cults were used as leverage by the two cities as they competed for power in the twelfth century. Perhaps then Saint Agatha's narrative, the imagery related to her, and the particular nature of her relics, were in some way more appealing aesthetically, emotionally, or spiritually than Saint Lucy's was. Oldfield touches on the relationship between these cults and the way in which the dominance of Agatha's cult came as a surprise due to *Siracusa's* powerful status, as it was once the capital of Byzantium.

St Lucy had similar potential, given the numerous associations with St Agatha, and certainly it attained universal acceptance as evidenced in liturgical sources, church dedications and toponyms found across Europe. But its dependence on St Agatha, and by extension Catania, seems to have restricted it, and is rather odd given the ancient primacy of the Church of Syracuse in Sicily.⁷

Although there may certainly have been more complex power dynamics between the two cities, ultimately leading to the demise of *Siracusa's* power, it seems misguided to ignore other possible driving factors that would have boosted the popularity of one saint over another in such a way. It is crucial, then, to consider the nature of the holy objects that defined these power dynamics. As Patrick Geary states in his book *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, "Obviously the political, economic, and social functions of relics in post-Carolingian Europe are conceivable only if seen in relation to their fundamental religious functions."⁸ If one

⁷ Ibid 148.

⁸ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 22.

regards holy objects and relics solely as political property, one is likely to lose an understanding of their theological function, which is, in fact, fundamental to the success of a political agenda.

The Twelfth Century and the Bodily Experience

In an effort to understand the factors involved in the revival of Agatha's cult it is important to consider the broader historical context, which necessarily includes the Christian theological sentiment of the time. The twelfth century marked a significant shift in many aspects of Catholic practice, particularly in its treatment of female religious figures. Texts and images more fully expressed the physicality and materiality of religious experience. This world was beginning to be seen as an expression of the divine and could be interpreted through Christian symbols. In this way, God's presence was described more immanently than it had been before, and by extension the presence of his mediators, the saints. Figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Francis largely contributed to these changes as their experiences exemplified a closer connection between the spiritual and the physical realms. They saw this world as a metaphor for the heavenly world and human love as an expression of or longing for God's love. The line between body and spirit was beginning to be blurred.

This theological change cast a different light on the material world, and devotional objects such as relics became spiritual capital, heightening the authority of whoever could get their hands on them. People began to experience the holy as something omnipresent that could contagiously spread from one object to another.

As Geary states in his discussion on relics, “They were part of the sacred, the numinous; but incarnated in this world, as had been Christ, without losing their place in the other.”⁹ Infusing objects with holy power in this way allowed for the meshing of the heavenly realm and the worldly, bringing the saints to a level that was much more accessible and therefore appealing. As Caroline Walker-Bynum states in *Christian Materiality*, “To materialize is to animate.”¹⁰ Perhaps the cult of Saint Agatha was able to rise to importance during this time because of its focus on the material, as it centered itself on her relics and physical contact with them.

The theological changes which so influenced the way Christians saw the world were sparked by a number of political events including the Crusades, which reestablished the connection between the Eastern and Western Churches. There was now a closer link between the East and the West in the form of religious images and texts. Each church had evolved significantly during the years of separation and particular religious figures had acquired different statuses in each doctrine. One such figure was the Virgin Mary, the nature of whose divine status had been debated between the Eastern and Western Churches. The East maintained only that Mary was the Mother of God, while the West put more emphasis on her perpetual virginity as a defining divine quality. The influence that the Eastern Church had on the West now that the doors between them had been opened included the view of Mary that focused on her motherhood. Framed in this way, she became a sort of aid

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011), 89.

in understanding the tangibility of Christ. The sensuousness that was associated with Mary and the intimate contact she had had with the Savior as he became incarnate through her, tied her rhetorically to reliquaries and relics as well as to the Eucharist.

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The Cult of the Virgin Mary and Saint Agatha

If Mary is to be understood as the ideal female in Christian doctrine, as she fulfills the role of mother while still maintaining her virginity, then the female saints can be understood as following this model and achieving sainthood in their ability to almost replicate the virtuousness of such a divine figure. Early Christian female saints were often venerated for their ascetic practices and specifically their statuses as virgins. While Agatha's narrative embodied these early Christian values, the ongoing practice of her cult, has led to the reframing of her narrative based on changing concepts of the virtuous female saint. The renewed popularity of Agatha's cult in the twelfth century, therefore, might suggest that there were changes in theological ideas to do with the Christian feminine ideal at the time. The simultaneous revival of the cult of the Virgin Mary is a likely source of such changes and perhaps the reemergence of Agatha's cult as well.

Agatha's narrative provided believers with a model female figure who was able to evoke emotions associated with maternity while still meeting the Christian standards of sainthood, which valued virginity. This narrative, which encompassed both saintly virginity and the sensuousness of motherhood through concepts of fertility and love, was structurally similar to the narrative of the Virgin Mary. Thus

it seems likely that the renewal of Agatha's cult relied on that of Mary's.

Furthermore, Agatha's breast relic would have carried connotations of fertility and motherhood, yet its detachment from her body maintained notions of a distancing from these maternal and perhaps sexual qualities. Such a representation in material form of these two opposing characteristics would have added to the understanding of Agatha as being linked to Marian theology.

In this way, Agatha embodies through her narrative a duality that seems to be grounded in the ideal female model, established by the figure of the Virgin Mary; she remains virtuous in her virginity, while still evoking the sexuality of maternity reflected in the image of the breast. Agatha and Mary provide a means by which to link the transcendent religious experience with the experience of the earthly world: as virgins they abstain from the bodily world and as maternal figures they are fully situated in, and even represent the earthly realm and human women.

The theological developments within the twelfth century that were redefining the Christian religious experience and its emphasis on the material world had awakened a presence of God and the holy within the world itself. As a result, central Christian religious figures, including the Virgin Mary, were beginning to be described more in terms of their physicality as they were rhetorically and artistically depicted. In the case of Mary, less attention was paid to her virginity and more to her maternity, which was a characteristic that brought her down to earth and into the human realm of experience.

If one assumes that Agatha represents the ideal Christian female under Mary's model, interpretations of her would have to change as interpretations of

Mary and the feminine ideal changed. Therefore, it seems likely that the twelfth century would have seen a stronger focus on Agatha's earthliness and diverged somewhat from the value that had previously been placed on her asceticism.

Christian theology has throughout history, fluctuated between valuing a physical experience of the divine and valuing one that is more transcendent. While the saints have traditionally been characterized by their ability to abstain from bodily needs, by the Middle Ages, Christian thought began to value the expression of such divine experience through physical sensation. That the divine had come to be described as such an immanent presence by the twelfth century, set the stage for the success of Agatha's cult; her narrative was sexually evocative within a religious framework, drawing together the bodily and the spiritual realms.

By the time of Saint Agatha's revival in the twelfth century, the Virgin Mary had become the ideal female prototype in Christian dogma, and it seemed to be under this model figure that Agatha fell. Mary was naturally of interest, for she provided the physical means by which Christ could be incarnated; much attention was paid to her body and she became a common subject in art, as well as often being at the center of ritual practice involving sensuous bodily experience. In his book *Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church*, Yrjo Hirn writes, "Just as the table and instruments of the Mass are the holiest of all earthly objects, so Mary, *i.e.* the instrument through which the divine birth was made possible, is the holiest of all earthly beings."¹¹ In this way, Mary maintained the status of an earth goddess in her ability to tie the spiritual world tightly to the physical. She was

¹¹ Yrjo Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church* (London: Macmillian and Co., 1912), 172.

depicted in art and written about as a metaphorical representation of a mediator to the divine.

The emphasis on Mary's motherhood partially served the purpose of explaining her role as mediator. The Eastern Church even used the term "Mediatrix" when referring to her. Jaroslav Pelikan discusses this in his book *Mary Through the Centuries*:

'Mediatrix of law and grace.' Whether from such Eastern sources or from Western reflection, the term came into Latin usage, apparently near the end of the eighth century. It was, however, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that it achieved widespread acceptance.¹²

Pelikan goes on to cite Bernard of Clairvaux: "She is our Mediatrix, she is the one through whom we have received thy mercy, O God, she is the one through whom we, too, have welcomed the Lord Jesus into our homes."¹³ Related language became common theological rhetoric in the West when referring to Mary. She was often described as a vessel or an aqueduct as well as an oven within which the bread of Christ's body would be formed. Reliquaries and tabernacles were even made in the shape of the Virgin, representing her as the container of Christ's flesh or the relics of the saints.

Just as the Virgin Mary had become a product of theological influences from both East and West, so Agatha embodied theologies from both churches, all the more because she had both a Byzantine and a Latin background. Both figures, in a way, were reflections of western standards of femininity and its concept of the

¹² Jaroslav, Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 131.

¹³ Ibid 132.

divine. As this female figure developed theologically, acquiring influences from both the Eastern and the Western Churches, her image began to reflect the perfect reconciliation of the saintly virginity stressed by the Western Church and the maternal authority that was stressed by the Eastern Church. Thus, the twelfth century and the globalization it brought about provided opportunity for Agatha's cult to be accepted more widely than it had before.

Mary provided access to Christ through her motherly qualities, for she symbolized the sustaining, nourishing aspects of the spiritual realm. Stories and images of the Virgin Mary's lactation that were becoming popular in the twelfth century provide further evidence for the correlation between her cult and that of Agatha. These stories are thought to have their origins in Norse mythology and eventually made it into Gaul where they became more widespread by the early middle ages. In his book *The Difficult Saint*, Brian McGuire discusses the various versions of these lactation legends and the involvement of Saint Bernard in their popularization. He mentions legends such as that of Fulbert of Chartres, a sick cleric who is known to have been cured by receiving three drops of breast milk from Mary who appeared to him in a vision. McGuire accounts for the fact that in this particular story she is referred to as a Mediatrix between Fulbert and Christ. Later, Bernard of Clairvaux received a vision of Mary as well, but his experience was much more directly linked to her rather than Christ. Bernard had a vision in which he orally received milk from Mary's breast. McGuire also notes that the milk given to Bernard empowered him to preach rather than curing him or connecting him to Christ, as was the case with Fulbert.

As a result of such literature on Mary, the twelfth century produced many images depicting these lactation scenes and what were called *Madonna del latte Images* that showed the Virgin breastfeeding Christ. Such iconography would have emphasized the sensuousness of the divine experience and reaffirmed the presence of Mary as a figure through whom one could have access to Christ. Mary became a personification of the concepts of love and charity, which were so heavily promoted by the Franciscans and the Beguines. In her book *Medieval and Renaissance Lactation*, Jutta Gisela Sperling describes the way in which lactation images reflected the developing Christian spirit towards charity and love:

Both the material assistance of Christians to each other and Christ's spiritual care for his worshippers came to be signified by breastfeeding.... In the visual arts, Charity was allegorized as a breastfeeding woman who nursed more than one child simultaneously to signify the displacement of maternal care onto one's neighbor.¹⁴

In a world where visual symbols often took the place of written language, it seems clear that a female saint like Saint Agatha, who was most recognizable through the attribute of her breast, would have been associated not only with the Virgin Mary, but also with the theological values of charity and love for which Mary, the ideal Christian female, stood. Although Agatha is not distinctly associated with a lactation narrative, the circulations of such legends throughout the middle ages would probably have had influence on Christians in Sicily and the symbol of a breast would have acquired connotations of Mary, whose cult was particularly popular in Southern Italy. As the patron of Catania, Agatha provided love and protection to the citizens who were constantly vulnerable to the treacherous Sicilian landscape and

¹⁴ Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, Practices* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013), 3-4.

the nearby volcano Mount Etna. Contextualized in such a way, Agatha was likely called upon as a mother figure and her breast relic provided a concrete affirmation of such love and care.

In *Mother of God* Miri Rubin also touches on the breast as a symbol for divine love in her discussion of the medieval Cult of the Virgin:

While the lore attached to the Song of Songs offered a great number of inspiring images of the beloved's breast, poetry and imagery were catching up too. Source of food and nurture, the breast was a sign of Mary's love. Since Mary cared for all Christians she was imagined as baring her breast when she pleaded for sinners.¹⁵

Symbols of motherhood like the breast and lactation contributed to the construction of Mary as a model for Christian women to follow. As religious experience was becoming more centered in bodily sensation and materiality, figures such as the Virgin Mary could quite literally be mimicked through spiritual and ritual practice.

Sperling writes:

...religious women aimed to become one with Christ in his suffering, but also nourishing, qualities. They identified with the nursing Madonna, experienced lactation miracles, nourished sheep, God, and human worshippers alike, and were themselves fed with blood from Christ's wound, milk from Mary's breasts, and similar bodily effluvia by fellow saints. Charitable acts stood at the center of women's extravagant Eucharistic piety, which ranged from licking pus off of the sick and performing food multiplication miracles to working in soup kitchens.¹⁶

The intense emphasis on the bodily experience led to interpretations of the divine that used metaphors of consumption and food. Consuming the divine, as in the Eucharist, seems to be a way of initiating the ultimate contact with it, and it was this

¹⁵ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 211.

¹⁶ Sperling, *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations*, 2.

type of close contact that believers were seeking in their veneration of the saints as well. Mary could be understood, through these bodily metaphors, as the link that joined the heavenly world to this world.

Framed in this way, Mary becomes a sort of aid in understanding the tangibility of Christ. The sensuousness that was associated with Mary and the intimate contact she had had with the Savior as he became incarnate through her tied her rhetorically to reliquaries and relics, which in turn associated her with Eucharistic theology. In his commentary on theories advanced by Caroline Walker-Bynum on the subject, Michael Carroll explains in his book *Veiled Threats* the parallel that was drawn between Mary's breast milk and Christ's blood by medieval female mystics.

Female mystics in the later Middle Ages, Bynum argues, used food metaphors to express their desire for mystical union with Christ...Since Christ's blood was seen by Christian theologians as a source of spiritual nurturance, this correspondence allowed female mystics to see Mary's milk in the same way.¹⁷

In this way, Mary functioned theologically as a sort of secondary relic, as she was seen as an earthly receptor between Christ and humanity. Her milk was the substance that nourished Christ and her womb was the flesh through which his flesh came into existence, thus her contact with him consecrated her.

This association between Mary and the Eucharist emphasized her nourishing quality and she was metaphorically described as connected to Christ's flesh in such a way. In her discussion of these new analogies of Mary as the universal sustainer and mother, Rubin cites Richard of St. Victor's short treatise

¹⁷ Michael Carroll, *Veiled Threats: the Logic of Popular Catholicism in Italy*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 157.

Charcoal and Ashes on burned offerings in Leviticus. Richard sees bread as being within the female domain and therefore related in some way to Mary. He also compares the cloister to Mary's womb, which he simultaneously compares to an oven. Rubin cites,

“The burning steam of the fire is preserved in the oven, in the fervent conduct of the cloister, the suffering flesh does not enter from elsewhere, but in and of that same virginal womb, it rises in Christ. [The dough is placed in the oven] not in pieces but in the form of bread; order in the cloister must be observed jointly not individually.”¹⁸

Richard's analogy establishes Mary as a participant in Christ's incarnation as she physically holds him within her womb, thus bringing him to life. He sets a clear parallel between nourishment and the incarnation as having come from the sustenance-giver, that is Mary, in order to create the spiritual order that must be carried through by females living within the cloister. The bread is a metaphor both for Christ and for the unified religious community and establishes Mary as an important agent and contributor within the narrative of the incarnation.

Caroline Walker-Bynum touches on this concept of the divine link to food in her mention of late medieval depictions of Christ in the “Host Mill.” She writes, “In the so-called ‘Host Mill’ Christ is as a sack of grain poured (sometimes by his mother, sometimes by the four evangelists) into a mill; wafers of bread and/or baby issue below.”¹⁹ She also cites theological literature by twelfth century theologians which compared the act of eating to experiencing the divine, including one quotation from

¹⁸ Rubin, *Mother of God*, 180.

| ¹⁹ Walker-Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 83.

St. Thierry on the incarnation: “It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones.”²⁰ Bynum discusses, “...*to eat* was a powerful verb. It meant to consume, to assimilate, to become God.”²¹ She then goes into the way in which fasting was considered an act that “prepared the way” for the consummation of the Eucharist and was particularly common among women in the later middle ages.

Agatha herself has been analyzed in the context of food and the Eucharist based on the image of the breast associated with her. The breasts held out on a platter in Agatha’s iconography have been known to be confused with loaves of bread leading to the blessing of bread on her feast day. In Catania, cakes are made in the shape of breasts on such days including that which celebrates the translation of her relics. Such a practice can indeed be understood within the same theological framework set out by the theories of Bynum and Rubin in their discussions of Mary. The practice of eating cakes or bread in honor of Agatha ties her to the body, thus instilling a feeling of her physical presence in the immediate space of the believer. Bynum’s assertion that to consume the divine was in some way to become the divine, provides a deeper framework through which to see Agatha as a model figure for the believer.

The material world provided the believer physical objects and images with which to access the divine and, in this way, it not only mediated, but also embodied

²⁰ Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 4.

²¹ Ibid 3.

the sacred world, often in its resemblance to it. As the sacred could be transferred among objects through contact and similarity, it was only a small progression to understand the consumption of the holy in material form along the same lines. Agatha's symbolic analogy to food elevated her status not just to the level of divine, but to its sustaining and nourishing aspects, which were traditionally personified by Mary the mother of Jesus and through the Eucharist. Furthermore, that the cakes made to honor Agatha on her feast days resemble breasts, defined her as spiritual sustenance through the same symbolic language used to describe Mary's sustaining quality. Therefore, it seems that the rhetoric and practice surrounding Agatha assured the cult's success in its association with Mary, which in turn tightened its ties with Christ as well.

That Agatha's cult may have been revived because of its similar qualities to the cult of the Virgin, suggests that Norman politics were not only secondary to the cause of this revival, but that they were supported by a much more deeply engrained historical tradition to do with the Christian feminine ideal. Through its historical ties with early Christianity, the Byzantine, and the Roman worlds, Agatha's narrative was able to fulfill both eastern and western standards of female sainthood.

Images of the Virgins

That the Cult of Saint Agatha reemerged simultaneously with that of Mary is no coincidence, then, for Agatha too seemed to represent the ideal Christian female under the same criteria. While there indeed existed many virginal female saints at the time, Saint Agatha was symbolically closer to Mary as she was associated with

the image of the breast and was often depicted in iconography holding her breasts on a platter as a symbol of her martyrdom (Appendix 4). In her article, "The Cult of Saint Agatha", Liana De Girolami Cheney points out that images showing the amputation of Agatha's breasts did not become popular until the twelfth century. She also notes that the subject itself was not depicted at all until the twelfth century.²² Perhaps the explicit depiction of Agatha's actual narrative in art contributed to the revival of her cult in the twelfth century. Artistic representation provided the believer with more evocative visual material through which to personally experience the presence of a saint. It was the most effective form of communication at the time, affirming the physical reality of religious figures such as the saints. Their narratives could be depicted in a space familiar to the viewer; a saint would often be shown in the city or even holding a model of the city he was patron of. While images of the Virgin's lactation were visual allegories for Christian theological concepts of the time, those depicting Agatha's narrative would have embodied Christian ideals on a local level.

That these images of Agatha appeared as late as the twelfth century implies a possible correlation between their function within the cult and the simultaneous spreading of the cult's popularity. Indeed images of the saints were often used as propaganda by political powers in order to promote a sense of patriotism and it is probable that those depicting Agatha were used in such a way by the Normans. However, it seems unlikely that the success of these images was reliant on Norman motivations rather than the other way around. A deeper analysis of the broader

²² Liana De Girolami Cheney, "The Cult of Saint Agatha." *Women's Art Journal* 17 (1996): 1.

historical and theological context might frame the Normans as having conveniently arrived at a time when the use of these types of images was a common Christian practice, which suggests that it was primarily the religious practice that helped promote the cult and that the political force simply used such practices to their advantage.

Social Implications of the Maternal Mary

The rise of Mary as a mother figure in the twelfth century may have reflected new social and cultural values that were developing in the context of urbanization, which was beginning to define European geography. In Sicily, Muslim rule had brought urbanization to a new level due to the support of an increase in agricultural production. City life encouraged a growth of the middle class, both among Muslim and Christian populations. Urban society defined by a middle class in this way resulted in religious practices that were based more in community than they had previously been. Byzantine Christianity had been largely defined by isolated monastic life and as a result the saints that emerged from this culture were often hermits or, in the case of females, virgins. As Sicily began to be urbanized, a devout Christian no longer needed to devote himself to an isolated monastic life. Byzantine churches that survived Muslim rule integrated into an urban environment and when the Normans came, they had already become a part of urbanized Christianity, as it had developed even earlier in the north.

Many historians have correlated the urbanization that characterized the high Middle Ages with changes in Christian theology. The nuclear family replaced monastic communities and the church became a place in which anyone could

practice his belief. Some historians have suggested that this new focus on the family as a center of community contributed to an increase in the importance of the mother figure, and therefore a more maternally focused Marian worship as well. In her essay, "Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century," Ineke Van't Spijker discusses the development of a family-centered society and its impact on religious organization. She explains that the monastery did not disappear but rather became a family-run institution, often under aristocratic authority. Monasteries were founded and built by noble families who were often tied to the bishopric. The founder would be deemed a saint himself, which would establish the family as more prestigious. She explains how these changes in the ecclesiastical structure affected who became a saint and therefore the ideals to do with saintliness. She focuses specifically on the role of the mother in such a context.

Spijker sheds light on the role of the religious female and her growing ability to be both a part of monastic life and to continue her role of mother. She points out that there may, in fact, have been more saints that were mothers or mothers living within convents than in any other period.

Although the saintly women according to their hagiographers, complied with the evangelical command to relinquish all earthly ties, broader family structures did in fact play an important part in their lives, even after they had become fulltime religious.²³

It was subsequently within this context that new interpretations of Mary emphasizing her motherhood, began to develop.

²³ Ineke Van't Spijker, "Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century." In *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in The Middle Ages*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 1995). 166.

In her book *Empress and Handmaid*, Sarah Jane Boss suggests that Mary's maternity was not an entirely newly introduced notion in the high Middle Ages but rather that a different significance was being placed on Mary's authority as mother. She writes,

...the representation of and appeal to Mary as a figure characterized chiefly by power and authority is an expression of the way in which Mary's status as Mother of God was understood. The development of a more intimate picture of her signifies not the introduction of a newly maternal element into her cult, but rather, a change in the interpretation of her maternity, and perhaps also of her motherhood in general.²⁴

Boss goes on to acknowledge the work of Clarissa Atkinson on this subject and her proposal that it was the rise of the middle classes that elevated the position of motherhood to a more esteemed status, "since religious reflection on the subject was no longer confined to monastic institutions in which virginity alone was valued as the most elevated condition for the Christian life."²⁵

A combination of urbanization and contact between the Eastern and Western Churches can therefore be acknowledged as possible factors that contributed to the new importance that was placed on the authority of the mother figure in the twelfth century. This transformation would undoubtedly have influenced Agatha's popularity as Sicily had become a geographical meeting point between East and West and, with the arrival of the Normans, gained tradition from both churches. Although the island was mostly urbanized by the Muslims, the changes would have had equal impact on communities, as there had been no direct restrictions put on

²⁴ Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), 45-6.

²⁵ Ibid 46.

the freedom of Christian religious practice. The eastern side of the island, which included the citizens of Catania, had maintained Byzantine Christian customs throughout Muslim rule.

With her relics at the center of her cult's devotion by 1126, Saint Agatha stood for both the virtuous Christian female, and the mother figure, which was easily attached to her image through artistic depictions of her and through the presentation of her breast relic. Although Agatha was not a mother as the Virgin Mary was, her position as Catania's patron saint would perhaps have characterized her in this way. The fact that she was considered to be a protector of the *Catanese* against the various threats in the region, including earthquakes and the periodic eruptions of Mount Etna, not to mention the Muslim rulers, would have also provided precedence for Agatha to be seen in protective, motherly terms.

As the authority of maternity had strengthened in Christian tradition by the twelfth century through changes to do with monastic life and the promotion of the Cult of the Virgin, implication of Agatha as a mother figure would, perhaps, have grown as well. Such a contextualization of Saint Agatha at this time considers a much wider range of possibilities for her cult's revival that include theological and societal factors rather than simply political ones.

Agatha's Relics and their Cultural Meaning

To this day, Agatha's relics are brought out on her feast day and the anniversary of their translation back to Catania in 1126. The breast, although somewhat deteriorated, is framed by a beautifully ornate reliquary that gives it

meaning and significance as it provides a sort of cultural stamp, contextualizing what otherwise is an anonymous piece of flesh. As Cynthia Hahn puts it in her article “What do Reliquaries do for Relics?” “Most important is that without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth. An audience is essential. Its attention authenticates the relic.”²⁶ While the relic itself is static, besides its deterioration over time, the cultural implications, and meaning around it changes based on the community it belongs to. The theft and translation of relics, therefore, provide opportunity for their meanings to be reassigned. Furthermore, relics that never change location acquire new meaning also, as the cultures and theological beliefs around them develop.

As the relics of Agatha were exposed to such different theologies, including both that of the Byzantine east and of the Latin west throughout the period of their translations, the meaning attributed to them was constantly readapted by each culture that had ownership over them. Thus, their arrival into Norman Sicily put them within the context of a new Christianity that was defined by Marian theologies and practices that focused on the materiality of the sacred.

Patrick Geary discusses the nature of relics as they differ from other holy objects:

The relics *were* the saint; they had more than a mere mystical or spiritual connection with the eternity of God and his heavenly court. Symbols of divine favor continuing to operate on behalf of men, they were also the reality symbolized since they referred not beyond themselves but to themselves, as the saint residing among his followers.²⁷

²⁶ Cynthia Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?” *Numen*, 57 (2010): 291.

²⁷ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 33.

That the relic is sacred in itself demands only the affirmation that it is so, established through the reliquary as well as the narrative surrounding it. Geary also explains how the act of translating a relic required the culture receiving the relic to reassign meaning to it through stories that assert the culture's personal connection with it.

Obviously the very act of theft often broke the cultural context that gave the relic its meaning. When a relic was stolen or sold, it was impossible to steal or sell its old function in its original location. Thus the theft could not result in the transfer of ideas or of religious or cultural values. In its new location it became an important symbol only if the society made it one, and this symbolism was necessarily a product of that society.²⁸

Whatever meanings early Christians in Sicily had attached to Agatha's relics before they had been taken to Constantinople were, in this way, merely their first layer of cultural influence, for they were to later acquire different meaning not only in the east, but also a third time upon their return to Catania. The relics would have arrived in this city that had recently entered the world of Rome's Christianity, which was of course a Christianity that was transforming, and one that now saw the female, with Mary as her model, in a new way.

The cultural implications of Agatha's breast relic would have emerged upon the relic's arrival in Catania, according to this new western view of the Christian female and mother figure. The singling out of the breast as an object of worship reminds the believer of the way in which Agatha was martyred while the breast simultaneously takes on new meaning as it functions within a more modern cultural-historical context. In order to understand the cult's quick rise to

²⁸ Ibid 7.

prominence in the twelfth century, it is important to also understand the theological implications that the relics would have had upon their entry at such a particular time and place. Isolated by its reliquary and detached from the body, the breast relic takes on a broader symbolic meaning as it has now been integrated into a Christian culture for which the breast would have connotations beyond simply Agatha's narrative, and related to figures such as the Virgin Mary.

Thus, it is important to consider the cultural-historical context when assigning meaning to Agatha's relics, which is fluid and malleable as a result of the changing theological thought of their surrounding culture. While the Norman political presence may have had leverage in instigating such changes in the relic's meaning and significance, local theology would have been reliant on the broader Christian theological changes of the time regardless of the force of an immediate political power.

Agatha's Relic: A Symbolic Embodiment of the Christian Ideal

In order to fully understand the revival of Agatha's cult, it is necessary to analyze the theological and even psychological implications of holy objects at the center of her cult and in particular, her breast relic. The relationship between the relic itself and its reliquary becomes significant in this analysis as the two objects concretely reflect a duality within the saint's narrative. This duality results from Agatha's virtuousness as a virgin that had originally defined her sainthood, and the equal need for her to maintain appeal among believers, who by the twelfth century

no longer saw the ideal devotee as entirely based on an ascetic lifestyle. Thus, more room was made for Agatha to fall within the role of the mother figure, as her virginity was now of less importance, making her perhaps more appealing to the modern believer. Just as the motherhood of Mary was represented by the image of her breasts in art, so too would Agatha as the maternal protector of Catania and its citizens, be represented through the breast relic. Along with implications of motherhood, necessarily came those of sexuality and fertility, and therefore, it seems plausible that an attraction to these sexual aspects were at play in the revival of Agatha's cult.

As Agatha's breasts were severed as part of her punishment for upholding her title as a Christian, the presentation of her breast as an isolated relic displays its detachment from the body and, in so doing, commemorates Agatha's martyrdom. As Bynum puts it, "Reliquaries glorify and sublimate partition. What they deny is putrefaction."²⁹ Scholars of religion have often interpreted the *passio* of Agatha and the severing of her breasts as having implications of her being de-sexualized and therefore further promoting her virginity. Thus, Agatha's virginity is emphasized by the way in which the relic stands alone, detached from anything and framed by the reliquary. This is not dissimilar to the way in which Mary was depicted in art throughout the twelfth century and later, particularly in *Madonna Del Latte* images which as Sperling notes depicted her lactating breast as "de-sexualized by deliberate anatomical displacement as a distancing device."³⁰ Furthermore, the traditional

²⁹ Walker-Bynum, *Christian Materiality* 185.

³⁰ Sperling, *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations* 4.

iconography, which depicted Agatha holding her breasts on a platter away from her body, would have contributed to this way of communicating the dislocation of her sexuality.

In her article previously mentioned, Cheney points out that the etymology of the name Agatha itself reflects her detachment from sexuality and therefore earthly desire. She writes,

Voragine also proposes 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 like to add that perhaps *ageos* also refers to her lack of breasts, since both breasts and the earth provide nutriment for the living).³¹

This analysis provides us with an early understanding of Agatha as a figure that abstained from the temptations of nature, but in light of her later cult in the twelfth century, it is important to take into account the more erotic interpretations of Agatha, which Cheney indeed touches on in her analysis of Agatha depicted in art. Paradoxically, it seems that later, an eroticized Agatha became the tool used to further express her virginity.

Similarly to the way in which Mary was tied to the earth in her twelfth century theology, Agatha would have been grounded in this world through the immediacy of her breast relic. The relic may, indeed have carried implications of fertility and earthliness; it outwardly displays the temporality of nature, as it appears to be decaying. Encased within glass and gold however, the relic is marked as something beyond the natural world as it is brought into the realm of the eternal and thus the sacred. Bynum explains:

³¹ [Cheney, *The Cult of Saint Agatha*, 1.](#)

Hence, in somewhat contradictory metaphors, holy matter is both hard (unchangeable and impartible) like jewels, and yet blossoming (alive and growing into glory) like flowers. The threat to be warded off is the threat that fragmentation constitutes a corruption of being—a corruption that not only destroys but also pollutes.³²

The artificial quality of the reliquary restricts the natural “blossoming” lifelike aspect of the relic, thus resolving the incongruity of it being an earthly object and yet holy or transcendent.

In this way, the erotic appeal of Agatha’s breast, which might be associated with worldly desire, could be maintained through the censorship of the artificially manufactured marker that it was divine. The relic was also incorruptible despite its detachment from the body. Her relic’s physical appearance displayed the Christian ideal of femininity as it encompassed a reconciliation of holiness through the reliquary, and lively humanness through the relic itself. Bynum writes, “In such accounts, bodies reflect graphically and exactly the virtues of persons; virginity or ascetic denial is manifested as literally pure flesh (like clear crystal).”³³

Agatha’s breast relic reflected her virtues in material form and as a result, they were appealing to the medieval believer, whose connection with the divine would have been mediated through such material means. That the relics of the saints had become such important spiritual property in the middle ages reveals a craving that Christians had for an intimacy with the divine, which could be embodied by humans that walked the earth and preserved even after those humans were dead through holy shrines. The existence of saints provided a way of

³² [Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 180.](#)

³³ [Ibid 182.](#)

scattering the sacred throughout the world, making it available to believers on a local level. In this way, the divine was increasingly imminent, but it needed to be distinguished from the profane world as it was made from the same material.

According to Hahn,

They [reliquaries] also, from the beginning, carry messages about the significance, authenticity, and meaning of the relics. Even if such messages are carried only by the abstraction of the prestige of precious materials, reliquaries are in their essence a mediation between relics and audiences. As such, we will see that they teach meaning and prepare the audience for the proper reception and treatment of the holy objects...³⁴

Thus, the production of the reliquary became important as a divider between the flesh of the sacred and that of the profane.

It is in this vein that the presentation of Agatha's relics contributed to her popularity in the twelfth century; the breast tied her symbolically to the earth, promoting her immediacy as a local saint and asserting the presence of the divine within the space of the citizens of Catania, while its reliquary designated it within the appropriate limits of the sacred. Such an attractive integration of the divine into an otherwise profane environment was a fundamental cause of the cult's assimilation into the context of the rest of medieval Europe. Without its relics, which so perfectly reflected Agatha's narrative, it seems that the cult would not as quickly have recovered from a history of suppression and marginalization.

An idea resting at the core of popular Catholicism is that sacredness or holiness is in a variety of ways, transferable. Contact with, and physical proximity to holy material heightens the experience of the sacred in the mind of the believer.

³⁴ Hahn. "What Do Reliquaries Do For Relics?" 291.

Holiness is assigned to material things, which through contact with other things assures the continuing existence of the sacred. This is the logic that defined the world into which Agatha's cult reemerged. While Catholicism has indeed been historically so linked with, and directed by the motivations of political agendas, its evolution has been based on the emotional and spiritual needs of the common people as well. Therefore it is important to consider, when analyzing the popularity of a cult such as that of Agatha, the extent to which its narrative and symbolism fit the theological sentiment of its time. Thus, a narrative like Agatha's, which so easily evokes heightened sensations in its dramatic attention to the body's experience of pain and sensuality, would have stood out to the twelfth century Christian as an appealing means by which to contact the divine.

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Appendix

1.



2.



3.



4. A decorative angel on the *fercolo* holding the breasts of Agatha.

