

March 9

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The 40 martyrs of Sebaste (d. 320)

In many Eastern churches, today is the memorial of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste. The Roman Martyrology commemorates these martyrs on March 10, and in the Armenian Church their memorial is celebrated on the fourth Saturday of Lent.

The twelfth legion of the Roman army was encamped in the Armenian town of Sebaste at the beginning of the fourth century. When the emperor Licinius ordered all Roman soldiers to offer sacrifice to the gods, forty soldiers in the legion refused because of their Christian faith. They were immediately tried, condemned, stripped naked and left on the icy surface of a lake to freeze to death.

The story of the martyrs of Sebaste soon began to be told and held up as an example of communal witness to Christ, which in this case culminated in the decision of forty people to give their lives. Traditional iconography has always shown how the martyrs helped and sustained one another in the face of certain death.

Tradition claims that the first church dedicated to these martyrs was commissioned by Basil of Caesarea's mother Emmelia. Their memorial was soon observed by all of the Christian churches.

A READING

When they had heard the sentence, they joyfully stripped off their clothes and ran towards the death that awaited them in the frozen lake, urging one another on as if there were a prize to share: "We have not stripped ourselves of ordinary clothing, but of the old self, which is corrupted by illusory pleasures.

"We thank you, Lord, because along with these garments we have laid aside sin. We had been clothed in it because of the serpent, but now we are naked on account of Christ. What can we offer the Lord, who first stripped himself for us? The winter is harsh, but how mild is paradise! The frost is bitter, but how delightful the consolation! Let us tolerate it for a short time, and we will be warmed in Abraham's bosom."

Basil, from *Homily no. 19*

BIBLICAL READINGS

Heb 12:1-10; Mt 20:1-16

Catherine of Bologna (1413-1463) nun

Catherine Vegri, a Poor Clare, died in Bologna in 1463.

She was an emblematic spiritual figure of the Italian Renaissance. The daughter of wealthy Bolognese parents, she was educated at the court of the d'Este family. At the age of fourteen, she left the court to join a group of women who wanted to live in radical obedience to the Gospel, in community life and prayer.

In 1434, yielding to intense pressure from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the Corpus Domini community - as the group of women called themselves - adopted the Rule of St. Clare. Three Poor Clares were sent to join the community as guarantors of the papal decisions. Catherine accepted these rather traumatic events with simplicity, and integrated the evangelical aspects of Franciscan spirituality into her own vocational journey.

A woman with an intense inner life, Catherine felt called to write about the fruit of her experience of faith as a way of helping the novices she guided to face their spiritual struggles. Her writings reveal her ability to integrate all that she had received: knowledge of the world and its problems, *devotio moderna*, traditional monastic teachings, and Franciscan spirituality. Everything is seen in the light of what Catherine considered the critical tool in the spiritual struggle, familiarity with the Scriptures.

When she was named abbess of a new foundation in Bologna in 1456, Catherine returned to the city of her birth. She spent the last seven years of her life there, guiding her sisters to deeper knowledge of God's humility and mercy.

BIBLICAL READINGS

Eccl 8:6-7 (or 2 Cor 4:6-10.16-18); Lk 10:38-42

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ARMENIANS:

Amenawag (d. 1335), neomartyr

WESTERN CATHOLICS:

Francesca Romana (d. 1440), nun (Roman calendar)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (30 amsir/yakkatit):

Invention of the head of St John the Baptist (452; Coptic Church)

LUTHERANS:

Bruno of Querfurt (d. 1009), bishop in Poland

MARONITES:

The 40 martyrs of Sebaste

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

The 40 martyrs of Sebaste

EAST SYRIAN ORTHODOX:

The 40 martyrs of Sebaste