

St. Apollonia



St. Apollonia was an elderly virgin and deaconess of Alexandria, whose martyrdom was described by St. Dionysius of Alexandria in one of his letters.

When Decius became emperor in 249, he launched the greatest attack upon Christians up to that time, becoming the first emperor to call for Christianity's total extermination. St. Dionysius wrote that the persecution started at Alexandria a year before other places, incited by a certain "prophet and poet of evil," who stirred up the people against the Christians. Backed by the power of the government, the pagans massacred Christians, believing that they were serving false gods. The "aged and excellent virgin Apollonia" was seized and struck in the face until all her teeth were knocked out. The mob built a fire outside the city and threatened to burn her alive unless she agreed to worship the idols and sacrifice to the emperor's genius.

St. Apollonia asked the pagans to let go of her for a moment so that she could pray. As soon as they did, she leaped into

the flames and was consumed, receiving a double crown of martyrdom and virginity. Because of the nature of her torments, she is sometimes depicted with a golden tooth hanging from a necklace, or holding a tooth in a pair of pincers. She is invoked by those suffering from toothache.

St. Apollonia, who died in the year 249, was martyred for not renouncing her faith during the reign of Emperor Philip. The account of the life of St. Apollonia was written by St. Dionysius to Fabian, Bishop of Antioch. Apollonia had all her teeth knocked out after being hit in the face by a Christian persecutor under the reign of Emperor Philip. After she was threatened with fire unless she renounced her faith, Apollonia jumped into the flames voluntarily. She is considered the patron of dental diseases and is often invoked by those with toothaches. Ancient art depicts her with a golden tooth at the end of her necklace. Also in art, she is seen with pincers holding a tooth.

Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (247–265), relates the sufferings of his people in a letter addressed to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch, of which long extracts have been preserved in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiae*. After describing how a Christian man and woman, Metras and Quinta, were seized and killed by the mob, and how the houses of several other Christians were pillaged, Dionysius continues: "At that time Apollonia, *parthénos presbytis* (dedicated virgin; a nun) was held in high esteem. These men seized her also and by repeated blows broke all her teeth. They then erected outside the city gates a pile of fagots and threatened to burn her alive if she refused to repeat after them impious words (either a blasphemy against Christ, or an invocation of the heathen gods). Given, at her own request, a little freedom, she sprang quickly into the fire, but miraculously the fire did not do harm her. She ended up decapitated."

The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches celebrate the feast day of St. Apollonia on February 9, and she is popularly invoked against the toothache because of the torments she had to endure. She is represented in art with pincers in which a tooth is held. In a late 14th century illumination from a French manuscript, the tooth in her pincers glows from within, like a light bulb.

Saint Apollonia is one of the two patron saints of Catania. In Germany, where the Fourteen Holy Helpers (*vierzehn heiligen*) or *Nothelfer* are singled out as the patron saints of daily life, Apollonia, protectress against toothache, is one of them.