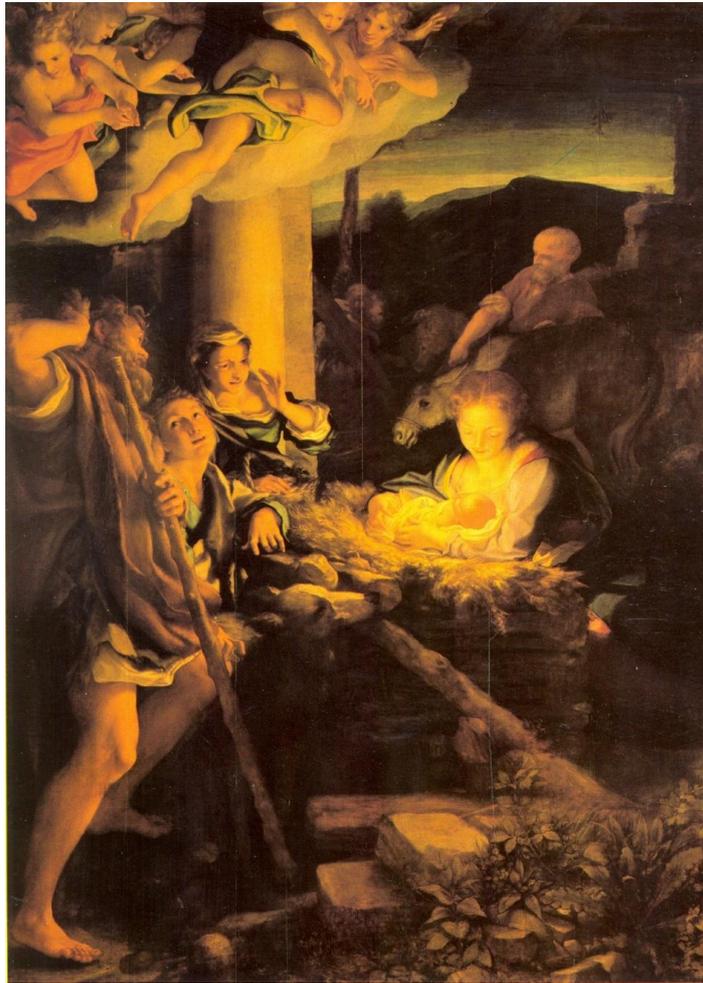


Art for Meditation: 2014 Archive

January 2014 - *Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of God*



*Antonio Allegri called il Correggio (Correggio 1489 – 1534), the night, 1522-1530, oil on poplar wood, cm 256,5 x 188, Dresda, Gemäldegalerie*

This large altar piece, even if it is set on the night of Christmas, can be considered as the triumph of the light. The light is Jesus, He is the “rising Sun come from on high to give light to those who live in darkness and in the shadow dark as death”. Mary is the one who, having given birth to the child, is the first one to be invested by such intense and sparkling light.

We recall the words the Angel addressed to her at the Annunciation: “do not be afraid; you have won God’s favour (Lk 1,30): this favour, in the painting, is manifested by the beam of light which makes Mary’s face radiant. It seems to anticipate the “woman robed with the sun” of whom John had spoken in the Book of Revelations (12,1).

Many are the characters in the painting. Joseph, in the background, is stabling the donkey, the woman is trying to shield her gaze from the light with her hand, the bearded shepherd gives the impression that he is contemplating what he sees, the young shepherd is looking towards the elder one in an almost rapturous way, as if looking for answers. In the vault above, the angels among the clouds look down, seemingly curious at what is happening.

**February 2014 – Memory of Saint Dorothy**



*Master of wings of altar in Vipiteno (worked between 1427 and 1467), Saint Dorothy, 1465, mixed technique on red spruce wood, cm 149.5 x 89.5 Stoccarda , Staatsgalerie*

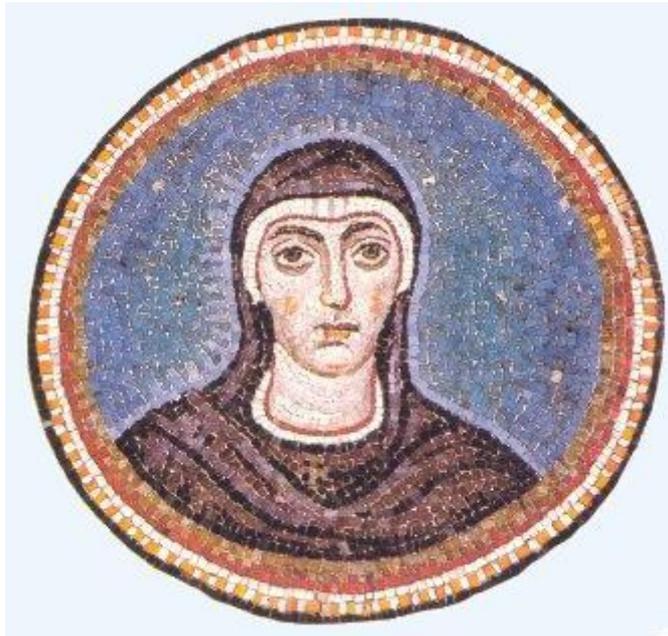
The story of Saint Dorothy (whose Greek name means “gift of God”) is set in Cesarea in Cappadocia in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, during Diocletian’s persecution. There are three main characters: Saprizio, the governor who condemns many Christians, Teofilo, a young lawyer who attends the interrogations and condemnation of the Christians; Dorothy, a young Christian who does not fear to confess her faith in Jesus even if she knows in this way she will go towards her death.

When the sentence of the young woman is passed, Teofilo, who has attempted in vain to dissuade her, asks Dorothy to send him some apples and roses from her Paradise, which she promises to do. So Dorothy is brought to her execution. Teofilo, instead, in the evening meets his friends and tells them about the trials, sentences and the promise made by Dorothy. At that precise moment an angel appears in the room offering Teofilo three apples and three roses: they are beautiful, never seen before on the earth, even though it was the cold month of February. And the promise made by Dorothy will be the starting of the conversion of the brilliant lawyer.

Now let us observe the painting of this anonymous painter from Alto Adige. Dorothy is very beautiful, with long fair hair, a long and elegant blue dress. She carries a basket in her hands – in this case with only roses in it – which recalls the miracle occurred just after her “birth to the heaven”. Also her gaze and her solemnity witness her life beset by persecution or fear is now only a memory. Now Dorothy lives the new dimension of beatitude, that her words addressed to Teofilo – reported in “Passio Sanctae Dorotheae” dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century and kept at the National Library in Paris – had so anticipated : “ In paradise, where the woods are eternally green, wonderful apples shine among leaves like gold and in the marsh; white lilies blossom as silver. In paradise, clear springs spurt out. On the hills grass is always fresh and the roses in the meadows never wither.”

So the roses, beyond being the fulfillment of the promise she made to Teofilo, have become for Dorothy also the crown of her martyrdom and glory, as the anonymous painter has accurately described in the painting we are contemplating.

### March 2014 - Memorial of St. Perpetua and Felicitas



*Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicitas. Byzantine hands, 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaics, Ravenna, Archbishop Chapel*

The occurrence of the two saints, from Tebourba, nowadays Tunisia, develops in Cartagena at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. In 202 a decree by emperor Settimio Severus (193 – 211) had forbidden all citizens to become Christian, whoever had disobeyed would have been liable for severe punishments. Perpetua is a noble educated Roman, mother of a two years old child; she is imprisoned because of her faith together with some of her servants. Among these there is Felicitas who is eight months pregnant.

Perpetua, during her imprisonment in Cartagena in the year 203, makes notes of all happens. Her report is a diary from prison in which, by a simple style, without any rhetorical device, the young woman speaks firstly about her difficulties and distress, then about the attempts of her father to convince her to abandon her faith and finally her visions. These notes are then completed both with the account of her martyrdom which was on March 7<sup>th</sup> in 203 AD and by an added introduction. In this way is formed the very famous “passio”, perhaps made by Tertullianus in its final draft which became so important among the early Christians in the first centuries.

So we have the narration of both the steadfast faith of Perpetua and the wish of Felicitas to face her death for Christ, which was possible only because two days before the execution she gave birth to a baby girl (in the Roman empire it was in fact forbidden to put to death pregnant women).

The two mosaic medallions we have chosen highlight the two saints whose clothes distinguish their social status (solemn and elegant with a white veil and jewels the one of Perpetua, simple and dark the one of Felicitas), but their calm look, their wide eyes which seem to gaze at us, spectators, the blue background that recalls heaven, unite the two saints in the dimension of their martyrdom, of the blossoming of their life in Paradise, the fulfillment of the Christian witness of their extreme gift of life. They lost their lives, their children, families but they have found the true life, the award of glory, the prize of martyrdom.

**May 2014 – Memorial of St. Joan of Arc**



*Jean -Auguste -Dominique Ingres (Montauban 1780 - Paris 1867) , Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII , 1851-54 ,oil on canvas, 240 x 178 cm , Louvre, Paris*

Joan of Arc was born in Domrémy-la-Pucelle in 1412 and died in Rouen in 1431. Her life unfolds around a few known facts. Raised in a family of farmers, Joan was illiterate. In 1425, St. Michael the Archangel (who will be joined in later appearances by St. Margaret of Antioch and St. Catherine of Alexandria ) appeared to Joan and asked her to free France from English domination . The countries were in the midst of the "Hundred Years War" and France was without a king because the Dauphin could not go to Reims , the place traditionally required for the coronation. In 1429, Joan decided to abandon her role of a shepherdess and donned white armour carrying a banner with the lilies of France with the names of Jesus and Mary embroidered above. The Dauphin met her and gave her an army. Joan rushed to the rescue of Orléans, besieged for months by the British, and freed the city. This was followed by a succession of victories until July 17th when King Charles VII of France was consecrated in the Cathedral of Reims, finally free to do so through the efforts of the young Lorraine woman.

The scene painted by Ingres refers to that day. We know she is in a church because Joan leans on an altar on which the sacred vessels are placed and in front of which there is a precious altar front piece. The armour is softened with a drape placed as a skirt and the young woman has her eyes turned upward, from where she is now commanded to liberate all of France. The King is not in the picture and basically we do not miss him because the protagonist is Joan, the girl to whom God has entrusted the task that until then no one had been able to accomplish, the defeat of the British.

Moreover, the young woman represented by the painter seems to be in rapture, as if in another world. Finally, her mission can be considered accomplished. Charles is about to become king in Reims, she has restored dignity and honour to France, and soon the British will abandon French soil.

Sadly, we know that in a few months, all - including the King of France - will abandon her. Joan will be captured, surrendered to the English, tried as a heretic and burned in the square of Rouen. In the painting by Ingres she seems to know what will happen as her face shows trepidation. She is aware that she must prepare for the last and painful act of her short life.

June 2014 – *The vision of Saint Lutgard*



*Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (Fuendetodos 1743 – Bordeaux 1828), The vision of Saint Lutgard, 1787, oil on board, cm 220 x 160, Valladolid, Convent of Saint Anne*

Lutgard, who was born in Togra, Belgium, in 1182, entered the Benedictines of Saint Catherine in Saint-Trond when she was 12 years old. The same day she was elected prioress, she left her monastery to reach the French speaking Cistercian community at Aywieres in Brabant where Ludgard continued speaking Flemish. She belonged to a group of pious women of the 13<sup>th</sup> century who led an intense mystical life. She was devoted to the Sacred Heart and received apparitions and messages. She submitted herself to a regime of austerity for the conversion of the Albigeis, some lords of the region and some poor sinners of the surrounding area. It seems she may have obtained miraculous recoveries through the intercession of the souls in Purgatory.

She lived for eleven years after becoming blind and continued to have a strong influence upon the believers of her time. She died on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1246. Her tomb, situated in the choir of Aywieres on the right side, became an object of devotion. On December 4<sup>th</sup> 1796, the community, in order to escape the consequences of the Revolution, found refuge in Ittre with the relics of the saint which had been exhumed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1870, these precious remains became property of the parish church to be passed, seven years later, to Bas-Ittre where they are still kept today. She is the Patroness of the Flemish.

The painting by Goya we have chosen was commissioned by King Charles III in 1787 – who had admired the talent of the Aragonese painter in those years – and wanted it ready for the feast of Saint Anne, patroness of the convent, in the same year. The simplicity of the iconography shows us the characteristics of the Saint in a few traits: the wide and bright monastic dress which represents her life, all spent in a convent; an

attitude of prayer which conveys the main occupation of all her life; the presence of the Crucifix, which the saint addresses with her intense look and the act of abandonment of her hands, which reveals the privileged relation she had with Christ, who, according to the stories and biographies, never failed to let her feel His presence through visions and apparitions. The play of light, the wealth of the pleats of her dress, and the style of execution bear witness to the great ability of the artist, one of the most important in the Spanish painting tradition.

**July 2014 - Memorial of Saint Mary Magdalene**



*Rogier van der Weyden (Tournai 1400 - Brussels, 1464), Mary Magdalene 1450-52, oil on panel, 41 x 34 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre*

Talking about Mary Magdalene in the Gospels we know what they have told us. On her unique figure then, stories and legends have blossomed. She is one of the most venerated saints from the earliest centuries. But we should look closely at the painting that represents her and which we have chosen.

The most striking thing is the way in which the artist has represented Mary. She is thoughtful, composed in her pretty dress, with exquisite embroidery on the sleeve, long hair and her head that looks decorated by her elegant headdress. The fact that it is Mary Magdalene and not a painting of a noble lady, a contemporary of the painter, we can confirm from the usual attributes: she has her right hand on the jar that contains the ointment she had perfumed the feet of Jesus with, in the house of Lazarus, "then Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was filled with the scent of the ointment" (John 12: 3).

The representation, however, does not refer to that Evangelical event. The magnificent landscape described in detail seems actually to remind us of the garden in which was placed the body of Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, was present on Calvary and will be among the women who, very early in the morning after the Sabbath, will go to the grave (cf. Mt 27, 56 and 28, 1).

I like to think that the painter has represented the Magdalene, who, after having found the bulb she had placed somewhere, remembers the words Jesus had said that day in Bethany addressing Judah worried

about the cost of the ointment: "Leave her alone; let her keep it for the day of my burial "(Jn 12: 7). That is why Mary is absorbed, melancholy, with a look that lets us imagine a deep pain.

She has not gone to the tomb yet, has not yet seen the angel, has not yet met the gardener whom she discovers then to be the Master. Very soon, with some companions and the jar in her hand, Mary will cross the garden, will come to the open grave. And from that moment, her life - but not only hers, also that of the apostles and of the entire world - will change, nothing will ever be as before!

**August 2014 – Feast of St. Clare of Assisi**



*fresco by Simone Martini (Siena c. 1284 - Avignon), Santa Chiara d'Assisi, 1322-26, is in the Basilica of St Francis*

This great Saint, who is famous for being one of the first to follow the path of poverty shown by St. Francis has left few direct witnesses, only 4 letters to Agnes from Bohemia.

Thus many stories and legends exist and were written about by Thomas of Celano soon after her death. From these we learn about her way of life. Before her birth her mother who was praying in the Cathedral of St. Rufino heard a prophetic voice which said "Do not be afraid, you will give birth joyfully to a child whose bright light will enlighten the world". The child was baptized Clare in the same church.

Simone Martini's attractive portrait is in the right transept of the lower Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi depicts Clare deep in meditation. There is also another full length picture in St. Martin's Chapel in this Basilica. She is dressed very simply in delicate colours and the dark background enables her to stand out more clearly. Although she is gazing towards the spectator to the right it empathises her detachment from earthly things.

She chose to consecrate herself to the Lord in poverty and with the help of St. Francis she wrote the Rule for herself and her companions. Soon after the death of Francis she obtained the consent of the Pope to live according to "the privilege of poverty". On 17<sup>th</sup> September 1228 Pope Gregory IX addressed "the beloved daughters in Christ, Clare and her companions" and wrote "in accordance with your plea we give our apostolic approval of your dedication to lives of poverty and confirm that you are not obliged to receive possessions".

### September 2014 - Memorial of Saint Rosalia



*Anton Van Dyck (Anversa 1599 – London 1641), Saint Rosalia, 1624-25, oil on canvas, cm 106x81, Madrid, Prado Museum*

Along with Lucy and Agatha, Rosalia is widely venerated in Sicily (Italy). She is not a martyr of the early centuries like the other two, but a holy hermit who lived in the twelfth century and patron saint of the city of Palermo, credited with freeing the city from a plague. For each person of Palermo, on the island or emigrated all over the world, Rosalia is simply and affectionately called "Santuzza".

Born around 1128, she was the daughter of the Duke Sinibaldo, feudatory not far from Agrigento, and Mary Guiscarda, cousin of the Norman King Roger II. When she was young she was called to the Norman Palace, to the court of Queen Margaret, wife of William I of Sicily (1154-1166). Her beauty attracted the admiration of noble knights; the most assiduous suitor, according to popular tradition, it is said to be Baudouin, the future king of Jerusalem.

But Rosalia refused every offer of marriage and, following the example of the anchorites, she retired to a cave on the paternal fief Quisquina, near a convent of Basilian monks.

From there, the young hermit, after an undefined period of penance, moved to a cave on Monte Pellegrino, Palermo, a beautiful promontory, next to an existing Byzantine church not far from a convent of Benedictine monks where she lived in a cell built over a well which still exists. Her hermit's life was spent in prayer and contemplation, solitude and mortification. Many people from Palermo, climbed the mountain attracted by the fame of her holiness. She died, according to tradition, on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1160.

This picture by the great Flemish painter shows us with a few strokes the characteristics of the holy cave where she had taken refuge, her poverty witnessed by the dark and rough cloth, the beauty still evident in the red hair and the face though marked by penance, her hand on the skull to remember the transience of life, the closeness to God witnessed by the angel that crowns her with roses.

An interesting item to consider is that Van Dyck was in Palermo between April and September of 1624, just when the saint's relics were found on Mount Pellegrino (July 15). For this reason, he left us at least 4 paintings depicting the saint and he was commissioned on the spot at that time. He was also a witness to the plague that broke out in August of the same year and then disappeared the next year following a procession with the relics of St. Rosalia which were carried solemnly on June 9<sup>th</sup> 1625.

**October 2014 – Memorial of St Therese Avila**



*Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Naples 1598 – Rome 1680), The Ecstasy of Saint Therese, 1647-52, marble, h cm 350, Rome, Santa Maria della Vittoria Church, Rome*

“One day an extremely beautiful angel appeared to me. I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying” (St Therese of Avila Autobiography XXIX,13).

It is the story of one of the mystical experiences of the great Carmelite saint, as she described it in her autobiography.

Let's read the text looking at Bernini's marble. We realize that the great sculptor has portrayed the experience of the saint almost to the letter, in his marble composition. The abandoned body, her sweet face, her eyes narrowed at the sky, her lips that open to a moan, while the angel, holding an arrow, pulls back the robes to pierce her heart.

The marble - heavy material itself - appears as light, in the folds of the robe of the saint, in the movement of the robe of the angel, in the left foot and hand of the saint that fall back. And so Bernini achieves one of the summits of which we call "baroque" in which the representation of the feeling and the theatricality of gestures play a primary role.

In the Cornaro Chapel - the design of which Cardinal Federico in 1647 entrusted to the great architect and sculptor - the marble group, which receives light from a window with yellow glasses gives the scene an air of mystery, increasing in the observer the feeling of also being a witness to the vision of the great Spanish saint.

**November 2014 - Memorial of Saint Catherine of Alexandria**



*Caravaggio (Milan 1571 – Porto Ercole 1610), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, around 1598, oil on canvas, cm 173 x 133, Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum*

Catherine is a pretty Christian young woman who lives in Alexandria, Egypt with her noble and rich family. When in 305 the Roman governor Massimino Daia arrives in town, splendid feasts are organized and the new governor invites his subjects to offer sacrifices to pagan deities.

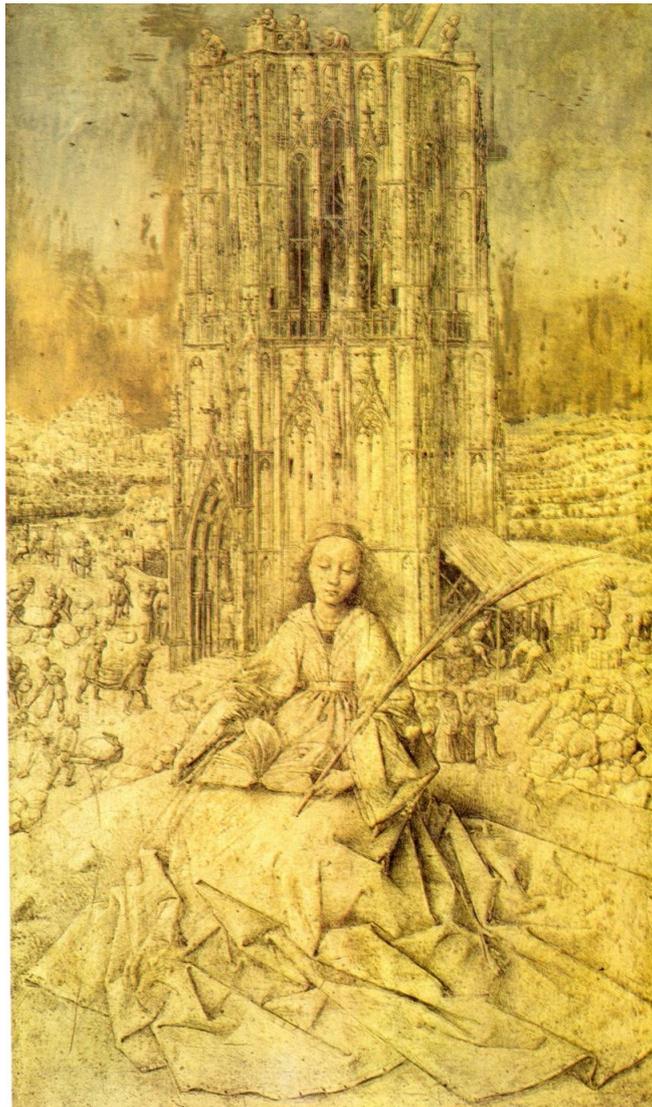
When Catherine appears before the mighty, not only she refuses to offer incense to deities, but invites the governor to convert to Christianity. The governor convenes some priests to convince the young woman; they not only do not succeed, but even they convert to Christianity.

Then the governor proposes to the young women, in return of conversion, she could become his wife.

At the umpteenth refusal he condemns her to a horrible death: mangling her body by a large toothed wheel. But the wheel breaks miraculously and then the young woman is beheaded. According to the tradition her body is picked up by the angels and carried up the mountain of Moses, the Sinai, where afterwards they will rise up the very famous monastery dedicated to her which still exists.

The cult of the saint had a huge diffusion and she is one of the most depicted. The canvas of Caravaggio is clearly symbolic. It shows in fact the saint with all the features linked to her event: the big toothed wheel behind her and the young woman leans against. The sword she was beheaded with in her hand, the palm of martyrdom is set on the cushion she is kneeled on. The richness of the folds of her dress tells us of the noble condition of her family. Her gaze turned towards the spectator seems to catch his attention to let him share in her event. The powerful light which descends from the top, on the right side, and invests the figure of the young woman, tells us how she is by this time, in the divine dimension, in the beatitude reserved to those who have been able to witness Christ till the gift of their life in the martyrdom.

**December 2014 - Memorial of St Barbara**



*Jan Van Eyck (Maaseik 1390 – Bruges 1441), Saint Barbara, 1437, drawing on table, cm 31x18, Anversa, Museum Royal Beaux Arts*

Barbara, virgin and martyr who lived in the second half of the third century, is a saint whose cult spread both in the West and in the East since ancient times although we have very little news of her life. Around her, many stories were born that have enriched the iconography and worship.

Barbara's father, Dioscorus, built a tower to lock and protect the beautiful daughter requested for marriage by many suitors. She, however, had no intention of getting married but she wanted to devote herself to God. Before entering the tower, not yet baptized and wanting to receive the sacrament of regeneration, she went into a pool of water near the tower and dived three times saying "Barbara baptizes herself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." By order of her father, the tower should have had two windows, but Barbara asked for three in honor of the Trinity. Her father, a pagan, becoming aware of the Christian profession of his daughter, decided to kill her, but she, miraculously passing between the walls of the tower, managed to escape. Captured, she was brought by her father to court for processing.

After several failed attempts to convince Barbara to renounce to her Christian faith, the prefect Marciano ordered her to be killed, but the young woman miraculously escaped from them. Finally, the prefect condemned her to be beheaded; it was her father who executed the judgment. Soon after, a fire came down from heaven and burned the cruel father, of whom not even the ashes remained.

The great Flemish painter, in the representation that we see, shows us the saint in the foreground and the tower, large and impressive, still under construction, with trifora evident. The thing that stands out is the contrast between the calm that pervades the figure of Barbara - sitting, her eyes turned to the book in her hand that she is reading and holding the palm of martyrdom, whilst the folds of her large dress seem to stress how well she is anchored to the ground - and the mess that is seen behind the saint, in the bottom, around the tower, where everything is a hive of activity.

Van Eyck, who signed and dated the work ("Johes de Eick me fecit 1437"), seems to put before our eyes the victory of the saint who, despite her death, has been able to keep her faith. That is why we see in her beauty and her tranquility, a dimension that is already the one of God.