

## 9. THE MIRACLES OF SAN GENNARO

Saint Gennaro, bishop and martyr, was officially designated **patron saint of Naples and Campania** by Giovanni II in 1980.

Saint Gennaro's real name was *Januario*. Not much is known about his origins. He was probably born in Naples of a middle-class family from the Gens Januaria. Once he became **Bishop of Benevento**, he went to the Campi Flegrei area to join in a service held by the Deacon of the Church of Miseno, Sossio. Under the Emperor Diocleziano, Christians had been more fiercely persecuted, and the Judge in Campania had ordered the arrest of Christians in the area including Sossio. Gennaro, along with the Deacon Festo and the Reader Desiderio, went to visit him in prison. They were recognised as Christians and the three of them were arrested for refusing to deny their faith. On 19 September 305 AD, they were sentenced to be beheaded. This took place in the Volcano's mouth at the **Solfatara in Pozzuoli**.

A blind man is said to have collected some of the blood and his sight was immediately restored and a pious woman called **Eusebia** kept the blood in two small phials.

Gennaro's followers collected up his remains – as with all martyrs, these are considered to have hidden powers – and they buried them in a place called “Marciano”, maybe along the ancient hill road from Pozzuoli to Naples. It was only later that the Bishop of Naples, **Giovanni I** had the body of the martyr brought to the **catcombs at Capodimonte**, where the oldest image of the Saint was found, dating back to V century.

A church was built in Saint Gennaro's honour on the site of his martyrdom in 1580 (**Santuario di San Gennaro alla Solfatara**), and here you can see the piece of marble that the saint is believed to have been beheaded on. Legend has it that when the Saint's blood liquefies, you can also see almost dark red blood stains reappear on this marble slab. In 831, the bones of the Saint were taken by the Longobard prince, **Sicone**, to the Church of Santa Maria di Gerusalemme in Benevento. Sometime later, between XII and XIII centuries, they were moved to the Abbey at **Montevergine** where they would be safer. They stayed there and were almost forgotten about until 1480 when they were rediscovered under the main altar in the Sanctuary.

It was not until 1497 that the Archbishop of Naples, **Alessandro Carafa**, managed to persuade Brother Oliviero, the Benedictine Abbot, to let the sacred relics return to Naples. The Archbishop put them in the hypogeum, known as the “Succorpo” in the Duomo where they can still be found.

We have no further information about the head or blood of the Saint until XIV century when **Charles II of Anjou**, during the building of the Duomo of Naples as we know it today, commissioned a group of French Masters to make **a reliquary bust in silver and gold** (1305) to keep the remains of Saint Gennaro's cranial bones in.

The first record we have of the **liquefying of the blood** was in 1389 when the city of Naples, as well as the church, were living through one of the hardest and worst periods in their history.

The Saint's blood is currently kept in two small **glass embalming jars** covered in different material which were made in the early IV century.

Saint Gennaro, before being nominated Patron Saint of Naples, was Patron of the Bourbon Kingdom and Captain of the Army because, as well as protecting the city from natural disasters, he was also charged with defending it from the enemy and with leading the Bourbon army to victory.

The miracle of the blood symbolises the close relationship between the people and the Saint which is confirmed every time the blood liquefies. If the miracle fails to happen it is a sign of impending disaster; the people thus pray to the Saint and beg him for help. In May, on the Saturday before the first Sunday of the month, the Neapolitan Church remembers how the **Saint's body was moved around**. This May procession is headed by silver statues of

Saint Gennaro's fellow Patron Saints followed by the Saint himself. The "**procession of the statues**", which is organised by the Deputazione della Real Cappella del Tesoro di San Gennaro, goes round the streets in the old part of the city, and is applauded by the people as they go past. The procession starts at the Cathedral and finishes at the Basilica di Santa Chiara, where the miracle happens.

The solid blood normally liquefies three times a year but at different times and in different ways. Sometimes it fails to liquefy, thus defying laws of physics and chemistry. The liquefying of his blood coincides with two other festivals: 19 September which is the anniversary of Gennaro's martyrdom, and 16 December (but the miracle does not always happen on this date) which marks the date of a terrible volcanic eruption which stopped when the Saint's intervention had been prayed for.

The miracle of Saint Gennaro's blood has been going on for centuries now; a mix of faith, mystery and charm. It attracts both the believer and the scientist but, in the end, is more a testimony to the piety and devotion of the Neapolitan people who, for centuries, have turned to the Saint with their greetings, requests, thanks and complaints.