

23rd of April: Day of Saint George, of the book and the rose

On Saint George's, a rose and a book. This tradition, which combines religion with the rose as a symbol of love and the book as a symbol of culture, has turned the 23rd of April into the fondest, most shared and celebrated day for all Catalans. And, as it happens with all well-rooted traditions, it is very often followed and cherished without knowing how it began. For this reason, we offer you an overall view of the origins of this tradition, which all Catalans, in Catalonia but also outside of it, share every year.

Saint George: history and legend

In spite of the profound devotion that Saint George received in Europe during the Middle Ages, very little is known of him as a historical character. A Roman soldier and a Christian, he went through martyrdom around 303 because he did not abjure his faith. The name *Georgius* means farmer, and perhaps for this reason the catholic commemoration was fixed on the 23rd of April, in full Spring; this would also partly explain why popular traditions turned him into the protector of harvest. His bond with the season and his patronage over lovers put him also in direct relation with the Roses Fair, which, since the 15th century, takes place in the courtyard of and all around the Palace of the Government of Catalonia.

Contrary to the small amount of historical information available, the legend around Saint George is extended and well rooted. A widely spread tradition in the Middle Ages explained that Saint George's martyrdom had lasted seven years, before a court consisting of seven kings. That version, which assigned a great tenacity to the saint, as he did not abjure his faith throughout seven years of torture, was condemned even by Rome, but it justifies the fact that the young knight was invoked as the patron of the knights and of the Byzantine empire. In those days, his help would be sought to fight against the 'infidels', and he was chosen by Georgia, Serbia, England, Greece, Aragon and by the Catalan countries as their saint patron. Legends and traditions also appeared concerning his giving help to Christian armies.

The most popular tale, written by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Golden Legend*, is the one that describes Saint George's victory over the dragon. In an unknown country named *Silene*, a dragon kept the inhabitants under the spell of terror. In order to soothe him, they would offer him periodically a lamb or a young maiden drawn by lot. One day, though, the king's daughter was the chosen victim; Saint George set her free and defeated the dragon, and the damsel, the king and the whole population were converted to the Christian faith. Since the 13th century, the image of Saint George mounted on a white horse, freeing the maiden and defeating the dragon, has been the most popular of all.

Saint George in Catalonia

Historical evidence of the devotion to Saint George (*Sant Jordi*) in the Catalan territory dates back to the 8th century: documents of that period mention a priest

from Tarragona, whose name was *Jordi*, who escaped to Italy. Already in the 10th century, a bishop from Vic bore the name of *Jordi* as his first name, and in the 11th century abbot Oliba consecrated an altar dedicated to the saint in the monastery of Ripoll. Samples of the cult to *Sant Jordi* are found, in that period, in the consecration of chapels, altars and churches in several places of the country.

The Catalan kings showed their devotion to Saint George: in his *Crònica*, *Jaume I* (James I) writes that the saint was seen helping the Catalans in their conquest of the city of Mallorca; *Pere el Ceremoniós* (Peter the Ceremonious) created an order of knights under his cult, and *Alfons el Magnànim* (Alfonso the Magnanimous) dedicated chapels to the saint in his kingdoms of Sardinia and Naples.

The monarchs and the Government of Catalonia fostered the celebration of Saint George's day in all the Catalan countries. In Valencia, it was already a popular event in 1343; in 1407, Mallorca publicly celebrated the day. In 1436, the Government of Catalonia proposed the Catalan Courts, which had gathered in Montsó, the official and compulsory celebration of Saint George; in 1456, the Catalan Courts, gathered in the Cathedral of Barcelona, created a constitution establishing the festivity, which was included in the code of the constitutions of Catalonia.

The remodelling works carried out on the building hosting the Government of Catalonia during the 15th century are the clearest example of devotion encouraged by the Catalan Government: the medallion of the Saint was placed in order to preside the gothic façade and a chapel to his name was built within.

Sant Jordi: Day of the book and the rose

It is very difficult to set a date to establish the beginning of the popular Catalan tradition consisting of offering roses on Sant Jordi's day. It has to be a very ancient one, since there is evidence of the celebration of the Roses Fair on the occasion of Sant Jordi's day since the 15th century. This very fact tries to explain the link existing between the popular tradition and the symbolism of courtly love represented by the rose. However, beyond, all possible theories that might justify a tradition, the most important thing is that it has remained alive, and that it is an unmistakable symbol of Catalonia.

In 1926 Spain established the 23rd of April as the Day of the Book because this date coincided with that of Cervantes' death; this fact annoyed England, which already celebrated the very same day for being that of Shakespeare's death. The celebration took quickly root in Barcelona and it was expanded in Catalonia, but the official purpose was gradually lost, as it coincided with the saint patron's day. While in other places the festivity survived only vaguely or disappeared, in Catalonia it became one of the most celebrated popular events, and, indirectly, it helped to encourage the diffusion and sale of Catalan books.

And so, in Catalonia the 23rd of April is Sant Jordi's day, the day of the rose and the book: the day of the Saint Patron, of love and culture. All in all, it is a day of civic virtue, of culture and respect among all those who live in Catalonia and, therefore, among all the individuals and the cultures of the world.

23rd of April: International Day of Book and Copyright

On the 15th of November 1995, the UNESCO general Convention, held in Paris, considering that books had historically been the most powerful tool for the diffusion of knowledge, that all initiatives promoting the diffusion of books were factors of cultural growth, that one of the most efficient ways of promoting books was that of annually organising a "day of the book", and recognising that this initiative had not as yet been taken at an international level, declared the 23rd of April "International Day of Book and Copyright".

Text written by Pep Camps, of the Division of Catalan Communities Abroad - February, 2003.

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