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SAGI: THE GREATEST *Experiment*

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Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

SAGI: The Greatest Experiment

ST. AGNES: VIRGIN-MARTYR OF ROME

Sister Jordan Thomas, O.P.

SAGI Torchbearer & SAGI Senior Advisor, Inspiring Faith and Theocentric Education

Words of Wisdom: *Man gives himself wholly by love, and gives himself as much as he loves. He is therefore in a sovereign manner given to God when he loves the divine goodness sovereignly. And having once made this donation of himself, he is to love nothing that can remove his heart from God."* (St. Francis de Sales, in *Treatise on the Love of God*) (1)

The life of St. Agnes of Rome is described in detail by St. Alphonsus de Liguori in his classic hagiographical work, *Victories of the Martyrs*. In writing this article, I have used St. Alphonsus' work as a primary source of information about this holy martyr of Rome.

BRIDE OF CHRIST

Within the first few centuries after Christ, God's blessings were poured out abundantly and mysteriously upon the early Church, amidst perilous circumstances which seemed more than unfavorable for Christianity's growth. Paradoxically, far from destroying the Church, persecutions against Christians, instead, augmented the number of converts to the Faith, as Tertullian (died c. 220 A.D.) famously observed. (2) Further, during such times of difficulty, the Church became increasingly adorned with the testimonies of innumerable martyrs of all ages and states of life, whose examples continue to illumine minds and hearts everywhere. A particularly striking example of one such martyr is a Christian girl who suffered death at the age of about thirteen years for her faith and chastity: St. Agnes of Rome.

St. Agnes was born in Rome of distinguished, Christian parents at the end of the third century, A.D. At a young age, she chose to renounce the many

worldly advantages which her nobility offered her, and she dedicated herself entirely to God by a vow of virginity. (3) Although monastic life was already being practiced in some forms in the early Church, it had not yet been fully established in the manner in which it exists today. Consequently, some Christians—such as Agnes—lived as religious by leading consecrated lives of greater prayer and recollection, while still dwelling in the homes of their respective families. (4)

As Agnes reached early adolescence, her nobility and exceptional beauty brought many young men to desire her hand in marriage; however, Agnes firmly refused their solicitations and informed them that she had already consecrated herself to God. (5) Nevertheless, one of Agnes' suitors—namely, Procopius, who was the son of the Roman governor—was particularly intent on marrying Agnes, and he continued to solicit her, despite her repeated refusals. As this continued for some time, Agnes one day addressed Procopius in the following manner (6): *"Begone from me, thou food for death! I am already engaged to another and a far better spouse. He is the King of Heaven; to whom I have consecrated my entire being."* (7)

EXEMPLAR OF FORTITUDE

Frustrated by Agnes' repudiations, Procopius consulted his father, Symphronius, in the hopes that Symphronius, being governor of Rome, could influence Agnes and lead her to break her resolve. Therefore, Agnes was called to the abode of Symphronius, who expressed to her his astonishment that she was so unwilling to marry Procopius. Agnes simply responded that she already had a Spouse Who was divine and, thus, far better than Procopius. (8)

As Symphronius was perplexed by this statement, one of the men of his court informed him that Agnes was a Christian and, further, that the One she called her Divine Spouse is the God Whom the Christians worship. Therefore, Symphronius began to urge Agnes to reject Christianity, threatening her with indescribable torments if she refused to do so. (9) Additionally, "terrible fires were made, and iron hooks, racks, and other instruments of torture displayed before her" (10) to bring her to reject the Faith. However, Agnes, unintimidated by these threats, only expressed her unshakeable confidence

in God and her readiness to suffer and die for Him. When Symphronius then threatened to send Agnes to a brothel, Agnes replied that God is more powerful than man, and that He would certainly protect her from harm. (11)

As a punishment for Agnes' steadfastness, Symphronius had her bound and sent to the Roman idols, commanding her to offer incense to them.

However, while in the midst of the idols, Agnes only made the sign of the cross and proclaimed that God alone must be worshipped. (12) Shortly thereafter, Agnes was sent to a house of prostitution, but God miraculously safeguarded her: the young men at the house were filled with such a sense of admiration upon seeing Agnes that they were unable to approach her. (13) "[O]ne only excepted, who, attempting to be rude to her, was that very instant, by a flash, as it were, of lightning from heaven, struck blind, and fell trembling to the ground." (14)

MARTYR FOR FAITH AND CHASTITY

These miraculous events moved Symphronius to consider granting Agnes liberty; however, the pagan priests of Rome believed that Agnes brought about these events by means of magic. Thus, they began to stir the Roman people to desire Agnes' death as a sorceress. Meanwhile, Symphronius, fearing that a social uprising would ensue if he chose to release Agnes, delivered the entire matter to his lieutenant, who, to appease the Roman people, declared that Agnes would be put to death by fire. (15)

When Agnes' executioners attempted to put her to death, their efforts proved futile, for the fire did not burn Agnes, but, instead, it burned and killed many of the pagan bystanders. This event, however, was only interpreted by the pagans as being further evidence that Agnes was a sorceress, and she was therefore condemned to death by beheading. (16)

St. Ambrose, commenting on the life of Agnes, says, "The more hateful was the cruelty, which spared not so tender an age, the greater in truth was the power of faith which found evidence even in that age." (17) Indeed, Agnes, strengthened by her great faith, was not only fearless in the face of her execution but, moreover, was filled with a supernatural joy at such a prospect. Looking forward to the life in heaven which awaited her, she spoke

to her executioner in the following manner: *"Haste thee to destroy this my body, which could give pleasure to others, to the offending of my divine Spouse. Fear not to give me that death which shall be to me the commencement of eternal life."* (18) Raising her eyes and commending her soul to God, Agnes was then beheaded, in the year 304 A.D. (19) She was buried near Rome, and a church was later erected on her burial site. (20)

Shortly after Agnes' death and burial, her parents went to her tomb to mourn and pray. While they were there, they beheld a vision of their daughter in the happiness of heaven, amidst other glorious virgins like herself. "Father and mother," she said, "weep not for me as though I were dead; for now these virgins and I live together in Him whose love was my whole life upon earth." (21)

HEAVENLY INTERCESSOR

Since the fourth century, Agnes has been among the Church's most well-known and beloved saints—one who has also had the special honor of being mentioned in the Canon of the Mass for many centuries. The relic of Agnes' skull can be seen in Rome at the ornate Baroque church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, and the remainder of her relics are kept in the church of Sant'Agnese Fuori le Mura. As Agnes' name in Latin signifies "lamb," it is a beautiful tradition that on her feast day (January 21), the Sovereign Pontiff blesses two lambs whose wool is later used to make pallia for archbishops. (22)

Agnes' example has greatly inspired many other saints and pious people, among whom was St. Thomas Aquinas, who always wore a relic of Agnes and who witnessed her instantaneous and miraculous intercession when he prayed to her for the recovery of his dying companion. (23) Similarly, Thomas à Kempis, the acclaimed author of *The Imitation of Christ*, had a special devotion to Agnes, and, by her intercession, he was granted many graces and miracles. (24)

A SAINT FOR OUR TIME

In an age rife with impurity and in which sins of the flesh are extolled even publicly, the life of St. Agnes of Rome stands as a beautiful illustration of

the value and necessity of purity and chastity. As the spirit of this age grows increasingly averse to divine law, the examples of the saints encourage us to continue to cleave firmly to the law of God in the midst of a society which, at large, rejects Him. Because she loved God with her whole heart and found all her strength in Him, St. Agnes, though a child, possessed immense fortitude in the face of temptations, threats, and death. We, too, being steadfast in prayer and in good works, ought to seek our strength in God, Who never abandons those who place all their confidence in Him.

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