St Agnes of Rome: a Model of Faith, Hope and Love for all time.

Agnes’ biography was written a century after her death. Some stories about Agnes developed in the genre of legend to teach something that is true. What is true about Agnes for us today? Without doubt, Agnes was a teenage martyr in a society in which marriage was legalised for twelve year olds. Christians have honoured her from earliest times. Agnes’ example encourages people who seek to live their Christian faith with single-hearted commitment, or who are vulnerable to abuse.

The traditional legends recount Agnes as a thirteen year old from a Christian family, a minority in Rome’s pagan religious culture. Although she was of great beauty herself, she had dedicated herself life with God as a virgin. Many admirers were attracted to her but she declared that her only spouse would be Jesus Christ. Some didn’t like that.

She lived in Rome in the first years of the fourth century. The Roman Emperor, Diocletian, promised that no Christian would survive his treatment of them. In due time, Agnes was ordered by a Roman Magistrate to offer sacrifice to the goddess Minerva. The official warned that she would die if she refused. Meanwhile, Roman law forbade execution of virgins. When she refused, the judge punished her by placing her in a brothel, seeking to corrupt her morals and her faith.

Agnes’ was humiliated but her integrity led people who met her to respect her. Legend recounts that the Magistrate’s own son, alone, tried to disrespect her, but was blinded for his boldness. With Agnes’ forgiveness, his sight was restored. Admitting defeat, the Magistrate ordered her execution about 305 A.D.:

Even pagan Romans were shocked: how could an innocent thirteen-year-old girl be such a threat that Rome needed to execute her? Ambrose wrote:

*She was too young to suffer, yet old enough to conquer.*

*All the others wept, but she wept not.*

She was buried in a catacomb on the Via Nomentana outside the city walls. Soon after, Christians began to make pilgrimages to her grave. Emperor Constantine's daughter, Constanza, built a Church over her grave.

Whatever about these details, it is certain that by 354, the Roman Church’s official calendar of martyrs included Agnes' name. A Pope wrote an epitaph for her. She is mentioned in the sermons we have of several leading Christian writers of the time. Scientists examined her relics proving her youthfulness.
Hymns were composed in her honour. Legends were told about her. Her name was inserted into the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Latin Mass.

Agnes' symbol is a lamb. In Greek, her name means 'pure'. The word Agnes is similar to the Latin word Agnus, which means 'lamb'. Agnes is venerated at two special places in Rome: the Church of St Agnes at the site of her death in the Piazza Navona (site of the stadium or circus where she placed to be exploited), and the place of her burial where another St. Agnes' Church stands on the Via Nomentana outside the city walls. Archaeological evidence here includes an ancient text written about her and her portrait, with her symbol, a lamb, painted on a circlet of gilded glass dating from the fourth century.

Agnes models saints honoured for both their personal dedication to Christ as virgins and for witnessing their faith in Christ in the face of terror. Though the “bullies” were more powerful materially at the time, it is Agnes who inspires us and whom we remember and honour today.

A custom developed centuries ago in the Church of St Agnes on the Via Nomentana. When Popes name Latin Rite Archbishops e.g. of Brisbane, the Pope places on them a circular collar-like woollen vestment called the Pallium. Maybe because the name ‘Agnes’ is close to the Latin word for lamb ‘Agnus’, it has become a custom to present two white lambs at St Agnes Church on her feast day, 21st January each year. The lambs are blessed and are placed in the care of a religious community in Rome. Sisters raise the lambs, and shear, weave and stitch their wool into Pallia. The Pallia are presented to the Pope on 28 June, the eve of the feast of Sts Peter and Paul. They are kept in an urn close to the tomb of St Peter. Placed by the Pope upon each new Archbishop, they become a symbol of the new Archbishop’s unity with the successor of St Peter. The Pope also wears a Pallium at solemn Masses. When you see the Pope or an Archbishop wearing this white woollen vestment around his neck resting on the chasuble, you may remember Agnes, heroic woman of faith in ancient Rome.

PRAYER

God who is faithful in loving all people,
You choose people whom the world judges as powerless
  to put the powerful to shame.
Guide us as we learn from your youthful witness Agnes.
May we may share her single-hearted
  and courageous faith, hope and love for You.
We ask this through Jesus, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.