

21. January 2020

“The grace of God in his Saints”

St. Agnes

*1 Cor 1, 26-31*

*Consider, brothers, how you were called; not many of you are wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible -- indeed those who count for nothing - - to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God. It is by him that you exist in Christ Jesus, who for us was made wisdom from God, and saving justice and holiness and redemption. As scripture says: If anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord.*

Today the Church's gaze is directed towards St. Agnes, Virgin and Martyr, to whom this text applies wonderfully. Let us first listen to some extracts of what is said about her life.

Among the numerous martyrs of the last persecutions of Christians under Emperor Diocletian at the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries, St. Agnes stands out in a special way, which is shown not least in the texts of the liturgy which have survived to this day, and her mention in the first high prayer of the Holy Mass.

Agnes came from a distinguished Roman noble family. As was customary at the time, she was to be married at the age of twelve. The son of the city prefect of Rome asked for her hand. However, Agnes professed the Christian faith and wanted to belong to Jesus Christ alone as a virgin. She rejected her suitor with the following words:

*"I love someone far more noble and worthy than you. His mother is a virgin, his father has never known a woman, angels serve him, sun and moon admire his beauty. His wealth is never diminished, his wealth does not diminish. His breath gives life to the dead, his touch heals the weak. His love is chaste, his touch holy, the union with him a loud magdum."*

*"Whose nobility could be greater, whose violence stronger, whose sight more beautiful, whose love sweeter and more lovely? - He has put a ring on my finger*

*and put a precious jewellery around my neck, he has clothed me with a cloak of gold and has adorned me with beautiful clasps. He has put a sign on my face that from now on I love no one but him alone."*

Her suitor, sick with love, almost lost his mind and tried several more times in vain to ask for her hand. Then his father came along and angrily took Agnes to a brothel. But Agnes was not afraid. God's angel protected her from any shame and her long hair covered her nakedness. So the place of shame became a place of prayer.

When her rejected suitor tried to rape her with his cronies, he fell dead to the ground. His father begged fervently that Agnes should bring him back to life through her prayer, which she did. Thereupon he would have liked to release Agnes, but now the pagan priests, who did not want to accept this testimony for the Christian faith, demanded her death all the more vigorously.

Agnes was to be publicly burnt at the stake, but the flames could not burn her. The church sings of this in the antiphon to the Magnificat ("Stans beata Agnes"):

*"Agnes stood in the midst of the flames, spread her hands and prayed to the Lord: Almighty God, to whom worship, adoration and reverence are due, I praise you and honour your name forever and ever."*

Since the fire could not kill her, the judge ordered a sword to be put through her throat. St. Agnes is usually depicted with a lamb, because she died like a lamb that you kill by piercing its throat. In her name, the Latin word Agnus (lamb) is included, but Agnes translated means "the pure one". (extract from praedica.de)

In St. Agnes we encounter in a special way the strength and purity of a virgin. She resisted her earthly judges in the grace of God.

They could not understand the innermost nature of this virgin, because they did not live in that grace and therefore in the love of God which fulfilled St. Agnes. The strength and purity that distinguished Agnes were not natural gifts, but gifts of the Spirit and above all testified to her intimate union with God. They showed that the supernatural life of God developed richly in her. This remains an inscrutable mystery to the natural man.

Dietrich von Hildebrand writes: *"The full spirit-born virtue of purity is only possible as an element of the Christian ethos. The one who possesses an organ for the completely new source of ethos, which shines towards us from a saint, will also*

*grasp that all holiness is an emanation of Jesus, the God-man. He will understand that this ethos is different from all purely natural moral perfection, that it is imbued with an incomparable brilliance, a unique depth, an incomparable victorious power.” (D.v. Hildebrand: Purity and Virginity p. 81)*

Saint Agnes becomes understandable when we look at her with the eyes of faith and see how the life of Jesus is reflected in her in a wonderful way. Thus the supernatural light of the saints becomes the proclamation of the glory of Christ.

This also becomes an invitation to us, who still have our calling on earth to fulfil. It is the grace of Christ that enables the saints to do wonderful works - it is not the specificity of human nature as the biblical text shows us. We can all open ourselves to this grace, so that the life of the Lord may also be revealed through us. God, in infinite wisdom, has set it up like this: *“those who by human standards are common and contemptible -- indeed those who count for nothing -- to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God.”*

Thus we can look up to St. Agnes, who responded to God's grace, overcoming fear of death and preserving her purity. Perhaps we are frightened when we hear about such a life and death. But it is necessary to look up to the grace of God in which such a path became possible for the saint.

God glorifies himself in her life. From the intimate connection with God, the ability to overcome the world and even to conquer the horror of death in the Lord grows. So we can ask this holy woman from Rome that we too may live up to our vocation, looking to the Lord who has called us: Everyone in the place where God has placed him!