

22. January 2021

"Agnes in the wake of the Lamb"

Part I
Bride of Christ

SCENE 1:

A woman sees a man who looks a little lost...

FAITHFUL: Are you new here in Milan?

PAULINUS: Yes, I've just come from a long journey and am returning to Rome, but I had to stop here.

FAITHFUL: You look like a clergyman.

PAULINUS: I am.

FAITHFUL: Well, I suppose you don't want to miss the sermon of our bishop Ambrose today. Hasten, for we are past the third hour. The celebration of the holy mysteries must have begun already! Listen, they are singing the Hallelujah right now!

PAULINUS: *speaking to himself:*

Ah, of course, the great Ambrose, bishop of Milan...

AMBROSE: Dominus vobiscum.

ASSEMBLY: Et cum spiritu tuo.

AMBROSE: Sequentia sancti evangelii secundum Ioannem.

ASSEMBLY: Gloria tibi Domine.

AMBROSE: Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. (Jn 12:24-25)

ASSEMBLY: Laus tibi, Christe.

Everyone sits down.

AMBROSE: Brethren, today is the birthday of a virgin; let us imitate her purity. It is the birthday of a martyr; let us offer ourselves in sacrifice. It is the birthday of Saint Agnes, who is said to have suffered martyrdom at the age of

twelve. The cruelty that did not spare her youth shows all the more clearly the power of faith in finding one so young to bear it witness... If it were not for these events lying just a few decades ago, it would be difficult to believe her story.

SCENE 2

Crescentia, Agnes' nursemaid, is setting the table in a noble Roman house.

AGNES: Can I help you?

CRESCENTIA: My little girl, that's unbecoming for the daughter of a noble Roman patrician. For that you have me and the other slaves...

AGNES: But on Sunday, in the sermon, our presbyter repeated the words of Our Lord that "whoever wishes to be the first, let him be the servant of all". And I want to be the first!

CRESCENTIA: You will be, my child, if you continue to practice the virtues fervently.

AGNES: Crescentia, there's something I've never understood... If our faith is so beautiful, why do we have to hide when we go to the celebration of the holy mysteries? Why do father and mother insist that I not mention the name of Christ at school? How I wish my friends knew the true God too!

CRESCENTIA: Agnes, my dear, remember that Our Lord Himself, who was the light that came into this world, was rejected. He has already told us: "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (Jn 15:20). Although without reason, they see us as traitors to the Empire because we do not want to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

AGNES: Traitors? But we Christians love Rome! Although of course, we know that salvation will only come from Our Lord Jesus Christ. There are no other gods outside Him who could save Rome! Neptune, Apollo, Vesta... Do you know that they are going to choose some from my school to be virgins and priestesses of the goddess Vesta? They can't count on me for that! I already know whom I love!

CRESCENTIA: My child, what pleasure the Lord must have in you!
AGNES: I don't know, but my greatest desire is to be a joy to Him.... Ever since I received baptism, I have wanted to belong to Him alone. Ah, speaking of baptism: I am so happy that Emerentiana, my milk sibling, is now a catechumen.
CRESCENTIA: And if you are happy, imagine how happy I am! But now go call your parents. Dinner is served!
AGNES: Yes, Nanny...

CRESCENTIA: My two little ones! How grateful I am to have been allowed to raise them both! And to think that now they will also be sisters in faith!

SCENE 3

CRESCENTIA: My girls, how were classes today?
EMERENCIANA: Fine, Nanny.
CRESCENTIA: If you want, go ahead a little bit so you can talk by yourself. I'll follow you.
EMERENCIANA: Agnes, Easter is not so far away anymore, and this year I am longing for it so much!
AGNES: Yes, it will be a great feast! You cannot imagine what it is like when you are immersed in water three times and you hear in the background the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."
EMERENTIANA: And then?
AGNES: Then they impose a white robe on you that you will wear for the next eight days, and you must see that you do everything you can to avoid staining it.
EMERENTIANA: And even more, to avoid staining my soul, right?
AGNES: Exactly! To be prepared with the festive dress for the marriage feast of the Lamb.
EMERENTIANA: The marriage feast of the Lamb?
INÉS: I asked the presbyter the same thing, and he told me that I would understand it in due course. You don't know how much I ask the Lord that this moment come soon!

EMERENTIANA: Presbyter Ceperinus is so good! He told us that on the first day of the week he would take us to distribute alms.

AGNES: How I would love to go with you! I love to give alms to the poorest, although of course, they are not my alms; I simply give what my parents generously give me.

CRESCENTIA: Girls, step up!

EMERENTIANA: But what's the rush, Nanny?

CRESCENTIA: I don't like the way that young man is looking at you, Agnes. If my eyes don't deceive me, he's the son of the prefect.

SCENE 4

THE PREFECT: That is why the Supreme Court of Rome and the judiciary have decided this case in favour of...

CLAUDIUS: Father!

THE PREFECT: Finally you arrive, son! Scribe, leave us alone!

I think we need to sort something out.... Some mischief you seem to be up to. Making schoolgirls crazy. What are you doing? As if there were nothing more sensible to do! The Magistra Elena has written me an angry letter. What am I supposed to answer her?

CLAUDIUS: Answer that the matter has come to an end.

THE PREFECT: What? Are you going to chicken out so quickly in front of the old damsel?"

CLAUDIUS: No. I am not interested in her. But I have found the maiden I seek.

THE PREFECT: Don't use high-flown words. What maiden are you talking about?

CLAUDIUS: The virgin I love.

THE PREFECT: Don't make me laugh at you.

CLAUDIUS: No, Father, I'm serious!

THE PREFECT: So my son is in love. But that is a sad story. Every love story is sad, at the beginning and at the end. At the beginning, because they don't yet have each other; at the end, because they've had enough of each other.

CLAUDIUS: I beg you, father, do not mock! This is the first and great matter of my life.

THE PREFECT: That is what everyone who is in love thinks."

CLAUDIUS: You will think so too, once you get to know the chosen one."

THE PREFECT: So speak up! Who is it?

CLAUDIUS: Agnes, the daughter of the patrician Honorius Placidus.

THE PREFECT: You are mad. A schoolgirl. Now I understand the Magistra's anger. I'm glad you told me: This affair is over.

CLAUDIUS: It is over in the school. But for the rest, and in the main, this story has only begun.

THE PREFECT: Do you want to make a fool of me? A child of twelve!

CLAUDIUS: In a year she will be ripe for marriage.

THE PREFECT: And how many new virgins will you have discovered this year?

CLAUDIUS: None, father!

THE PREFECT: Come, son, a cold shower would do you good to cool your passion.

CLAUDIUS: Father, this is no mere passion. I must see her, or I die! I beg you, open me the door to the house of the patrician Honorius Placidus. You are Prefect and Supreme Judge of Rome! Who could deny you anything?

Brief silence

THE PREFECT: Claudius, I give you one opportunity. But I warn you: if I notice even the slightest sign that this is just one of your adventures, know that you can never again count on me as a mediator for your love stories....

SCENE 5

AGNES: My Jesus! How could it happen that a young man should stare at me so horribly when I came out of school?
Am I a sinner?
My Jesus! I am Yours."

SCENE 6

Knock on the door

CRESCENTIA: Child Agnes, your parents have sent me to make you ready...

AGNES: To get ready for what, if today is not a school day?

CRESCENTIA: No, my child, but they are expecting guests. Come, sit down, I'm going to comb that beautiful hair. Today your parents want to see you shine in all your beauty.

AGNES: Crescentia, but I want to reserve my beauty for the Lord; and let my adornment be virtues instead of pearls.

CRESCENTIA: I understand you, little one. Come here, I will just cover your hair with a veil.

LAURENTIA: Hurry up, Crescentia, bring the girl!

THE PREFECT: It is an honour for me to pay a visit to your Domus, Honorius Placidus. And to you, noble Lady Laurentia, I bring a special greeting from my wife. Allow me to introduce you to my son Claudius.

CLAUDIUS: Ave!

HONORIUS PL.: Please sit down...

CLAUDIUS: First, I must apologise to your daughter. Agnes, recently I saw you for the first time when you had just come out of school, and I stared at you inappropriately. But perhaps you didn't notice.

AGNES: I noticed and turned away and forgave you.

CLAUDIUS: I thank you.

THE PREFECT: Virgin Agnes, my son wishes to present you with a small gift."

CLAUDIUS: May I give you this cup? You shall drink happiness from it. It is a Greek cup, made of gold, and there are pearls around the foot. "

AGNES: I cannot accept a gift from you.

CLAUDIUS: But I don't want it back either..

AGNES: Then sell it and give the money to the poor!

CLAUDIUS: You offend me, though you certainly don't mean to.

AGNES: My cup is filled with sorrow.

CLAUDIUS: I know sorrow, the sorrow of love. Will you give it to me?

AGNES: Another will give it to you.

CLAUDIUS: Who?

AGNES: The one I love.

CLAUDIUS: The one you love?

HONORIUS PL: Agnes, what do you say?

AGNES: I tell you, Claudius, that you may know with certainty:
never will I be your bride.

THE PREFECT: Allow me to smile. That's what they all say. Young girls
say so and do not see Cupid already putting the arrow on
the bow. No wrinkles between your eyes, Claudius!

CLAUDIUS: Agnes, am I the reason?"

AGNES: No Claudius, I say it again: my heart belongs to another:
My beloved is more noble, more powerful, and fairer
than any other. He whom the angels serve - his mother is
a virgin, and his father knew never woman.,. The sun
and the moon marvel at the beauty of him whose works
never fail, whose riches never diminish, by whose odour
dead men rise again to life, by whose touch the sick are
comforted. His love is chastity, his nearness holiness,
union with him is virginity itself. Whose lineage is
higher, whose power stronger, whose beauty more
perfect, whose love sweeter and whose grace more
lovely! This is my bridegroom.

THE PREFECT: By Jupiter! Madness befalls the child!

HONORIUS PLACIDUS AND LADY LAURENTIA: Agnes!

CLAUDIUS: And who is this laughable lover - if he exists at all?
Speak! Name him!

AGNES: He is... Jesus Christ.

A cry, a clanging sound.

CLAUDIUS: I crush this cup before you. This is how I crush you,
wretched Christian!

He walks out the door, while shouting:

I will denounce her!