

5. February 2022

“Bravery and Spirit of fortitude”
St. Agatha (+ 251 under emperor Decius)

Lk 9:23-26

At that time Jesus said to the crowd: "If anyone wants to be my disciple, deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What good is it to a man if he wins the whole world, but loses himself and suffers harm? For whosoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his majesty and in the majesty of the Father and of the holy angels.

Today we meet again a young saint, who, under terrible persecution, became a martyr for the love of Christ. In St. Agatha we discover a loving soul, as well as in St. Agnes, whom we recently commemorated. They, having put into practice the words of today's Gospel, are a model for us in following our Lord.

Since the saints are not only there for us to admire and invoke, but also to imitate, we can ask ourselves: What could a burning love like hers work in me? I do not mean that each of us should feel the longing to suffer martyrdom for Christ and to endure tortures like those of St. Agnes and St. Agatha. But each one of us must be filled with that same spirit in which God glorifies himself and also grants us the strength for martyrdom. It is the virtue of bravery and, even more so, the spirit of fortitude.

But let us begin by saying a few words about the life of Saint Agatha...

While still very young, Agatha had consecrated her virginity to God by a vow. Filled with the love of Jesus, her only desire was to give her life for Him, her heavenly Bridegroom.

Under the Emperor Decius, a terrible persecution of Christians broke out. On the island of Sicily, where Agatha lived, the governor of Katanea, Quintianus, raged against the Christians. He had heard about the wealth and beauty of this holy virgin, and ordered her to be presented to him. When Agatha learned of this order, she begged her Saviour to give her strength in battle, and uttered these beautiful words:

"Jesus Christ, Most High Lord of all things, you see my heart, you know what I long for; be the sole owner of all that I am and have. You are my shepherd, O my God, and I am your sheep; make me worthy to triumph over the devil."

Quintianus asked her: "Whose estate are you?" She answered, "I am a free and a noble woman." "Why are you not ashamed, if you are a free and noble one, to behave and dress like a slave?" asked the governor. Agatha replied, "Because I am a servant of Christ." "If you were born free and noble, how could you call yourself a handmaiden?" Agatha: "To serve Christ is to reign, and his service is true freedom." The governor: "How! Are we not free then, because we despise the crucified one and honor the gods?" Agatha: "How can you be free if you serve lifeless idols and sell your soul to hell?"

Quintianus, who desired her, subjected her to various tortures. But nothing broke the pious virgin! She didn't lose her courage or her purity...

Quintianus threatened her with terrible torments, if she refused to sacrifice to the gods. But Agatha replied: "Vain are your words and in vain"! The governor: "Stop professing Christianity, whose name I cannot bear to hear." Agatha: "I will confess and praise that name with heart and mouth as long as I live." Furious about this confession, Quintianus ordered the virgin to be stripped naked and thrown on sharp glass and burning coals.

Agatha endured this torture steadfastly. But when an earthquake suddenly struck during the torture, the people rushed up and shouted, "Unjust Judge, leave her alone; the gods avenge innocence. The tyrant, fearing the fury of the people, led the virgin back to the dungeon and hid himself. No sooner was the Christian heroine in the dungeon than she fell on her knees and prayed: "Lord, my Creator, my protection and strength from my youth! You who purged all evil inclinations from my heart and kept me immaculate, who in torment gave me patience and victory over all tortures; receive my spirit graciously, for the moment has come when I shall leave this wretched earth and come to you, Most Merciful One". During this prayer, she fell softly asleep in the Lord.

This in regard to the story of St. Agatha...

At the beginning of the meditation, we had pointed out that it was the virtue of bravery and the spirit of fortitude that led St. Agatha to this world-transcending attitude.

With the bravery, which we can acquire as a virtue, we glorify the Lord! If, for example, we endure for His sake the fatigues of the apostolate; if we bear day by day the difficulties of our human nature, with our eyes fixed on Him, and try to overcome them; if for His sake we bravely endure illness, etc., then we will be showing the Lord our love. And He, in His unsurpassable Wisdom, will strengthen us interiorly, so that we may be victorious in the battle that has been entrusted to all who follow the Lord.

But even greater than the virtue of bravery is the spirit of fortitude that filled St. Agatha. This gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to do deeds like those we hear in the stories of the saints, because it is the same Holy Spirit in us who performs them. By practicing the virtues, we are preparing the ground for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and, so to speak, set sail for him.

We too need both the virtue and the gift of the Spirit to a high degree, all the more so as the anti-Christian spirit is increasing in the world and in the Church.

NOTE: To go deeper into the virtue of fortitude, you can reread the series of meditations that dealt with this topic:

- The virtue of fortitude, Part I: <http://en.elijamission.net/the-virtue-of-fortitude-part-i/>
- The virtue of fortitude, Part II: <http://en.elijamission.net/the-virtue-of-fortitude-part-ii/>
- The virtue of fortitude, Part III: <http://en.elijamission.net/the-virtue-of-fortitude-part-iii/>
- The virtue of fortitude, Part IV: <http://en.elijamission.net/the-virtue-of-fortitude-part-iv/>