

19. January 2023



"Agnes in the wake of the Lamb"

Part II

Unyielding in tribulation

Scene 7:

CLAUDIUS: I have come to bring public charges against the virgin Agnes, daughter of the patrician Honorius Placidus and his wife Laurentia. I bring charges against this Agnes for blasphemy and high treason. As there is danger of escape, I request immediate arrest.

AMBROSE: This is how little Agnes, barely 12 years old, was chained and locked up in a dungeon...
In prison and in the process, the maiden proved that she truly belonged to the Lamb's wake, not only having preserved her virginity at all costs, but also in that "no lie was found in her mouth" and truthfulness shone through in her every word.

Scene 8:

In prison, footsteps are heard and a prison gate is opened.

THE PREFECT: Please, stay seated! The visit I am paying you is in no way official.
Agnes, I very much regret what has happened, both the step you have taken, which I do not understand, of confessing to this blasphemous Christ, and my son's rashness. He has worked himself up into an immoderate hatred against you. It is the hatred of love, and that is more passionate than any other hatred. Claudius has made a public complaint against you in due form to the Supreme Court. Thereupon they had to arrest you; even I, as Supreme Judge, could not prevent it, in spite of my attempts....
But the whole thing can still be stopped:

Look, Agnes, I do not know, nor do I want to know, how you came into this abominable connection with the Christians. I am not even sure if you really have such a connection as you pretend. Perhaps you only used this unfortunate name to reject my son as fiercely as possible. I have therefore come to you only for the sake of one question: Is it true that you are a Christian and have been baptised? (Agnes already wants to answer) Do not answer at once! Think about it: If you only tell me that you do not want to be a Christian, this trial need not even begin, and you will be released from prison at once, and I myself will take you home to your parents. Note that I say, 'You don't want to be a Christian'; for perhaps you are, but no longer want to be... Please, Agnes, don't answer yet!

Short silence

AGNES: My silence speaks louder than my word: I am a Christian.

Short silence

THE PREFECT: You should know that I did everything in my power to save the seduced daughter of a Roman patrician from misfortune. But you did not want to be helped. Tomorrow will be the first session of the trial. Oh, I almost forgot: A little girl asked me to give you this letter.

SCENE 9:

Agnes Reads at the beginning and the voice of Emerenciana enters.

Dearest Agnes, it has been only a short time since you were taken from our side. You can imagine the immense pain of your parents, of Crescencia, of me and of the whole community of Christians! But I don't want to burden you with more suffering than you already carry! You know what? Tonight Our Lord comforted me: in a dream I saw you and I saw myself. We were going hand in hand to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb, and the Lamb shone like the sun and wiped away all the tears from our eyes. I think I am beginning to understand what the Wedding of the Lamb is, which you had told me about!

All the Christians of Rome are praying incessantly for you. And the presbyter Ceferinus told me that, as if by a miracle, he was able to move the Judge to grant him a visit to you. Agnes: he will bring you the bread of the angels!

Scene 10:

THE PREFECT: There is a state charge against the virgin Agnes, daughter of the Roman patrician Honorius Placidus, for blasphemy and high treason. This state prosecution was raised by the present state plaintiff, the jurist Fortunatus Minor. The state charge was dutifully brought on the basis of the complaint and indictment filed by Claudius, son of the prefect Minucius Rufus. Defence counsel for the accused is the jurist Aurelius Valerianus. Summon the accused!

Agnes can be heard coming, chains clanking.

AGNES: Peace be with you!

THE PREFECT: I will not take it as a mockery of the court that you come before us with the salute of Christians. But I hear from this greeting that you openly confess yourself to us as a Christian. Let us now take up the case. The defence counsel for the accused has the floor.

AURELIUS: Allow me to ask the accused some questions. Agnes, could you tell me how your relationship with the Christians began?

AGNES: Even when I was a small child, our slave and nurse Crescentia told me about Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and his resurrection. When Crescentia escaped in the terrible bloodbath - she had been left for dead with severe wounds, but she was able to flee to my parents at night - I knew in my young years that many innocent people had sacrificed themselves for the sake of Christ. Then my filial love overflowed for Christ, who, to redeem us all, suffered death for us.

AURELIUS: Did you often attend the Christian ceremonies?

AGNES: Not often enough.

AURELIUS: Did you take part in the activities of the Christians other than the ceremonies, and if so, in what activities?

AGNES: I was permitted a few times to distribute alms and to visit the sick.

AURELIUS: Do you have a friend of the same age who is a Christian?"

AGNES: Yes.
AURELIUS: Only one?
AGNES: Yes, only one.
AURELIUS: And who is that?
AGNES: I refuse to answer that.
AURELIUS: Does anyone at school know that you are a Christian?
AGNES: No.
AURELIUS: Is it true that Claudius first saw you when you were just going home from school?

AGNES: Yes.
AURELIUS: What did you think or feel when he looked at you then?
AGNES: I felt that something terrible was creeping towards me.
AURELIUS: And what was it like when he visited you in your parents' house?
AGNES: I felt sorry for him. For evil had all constricted him.
AURELIUS: And why did you confess Christ so openly before him?"
AGNES: For the sake of truth.
FORTUNATO MIN.: What's all this about.... Let's get to the point! Your Honour, may I question the accused?
THE PREFECT: The State Plaintiff has the floor.
FORTUNATO MIN.: When were you baptised a Christian?
AGNES: Five years ago I received baptism.
FORTUNATO MIN.: What did they teach you about our gods when you were preparing for baptism?
AGNES: That they are demons.
FORTUNATO MIN.: When at your baptism you renounced in solemn oaths the adversary of your Christ, the so-called Satan; did you also renounce our gods, whom you call demons?
AGNES: Yes.
FORTUNATO MIN.: So you plead guilty to blasphemy against the gods?
AGNES: No. I have renounced Satan and the gods, but never insulted them.
AURELIUS: Fortunatus, the Supreme Judge himself, who witnessed the scene when Agnes confessed to be a Christian, testified that she never blasphemed the gods with a word.
FORTUNATO MIN.: Very true. Not in word, but in deed. To profess a faith which not only deprives our gods of their divinity, but also regards them as demons - is this not blasphemy and a mockery of the gods? Furthermore, if we take into consideration the judicial decree of the divine Emperor, which states that to complete the offence it is required that the blasphemy of the gods be uttered before witnesses and in the presence of a public person, then we have all the evidence we need

to declare the accused guilty. Why would any more evidence be necessary?

THE PREFECT: It is enough. In three days I will pronounce sentence. The accused is to be taken away.

Scene 11:

THE PREFECT: Agnes, I have come to give you some good news. When the session ended two days ago, I thought all hope of saving your case was lost. But today I received an unexpected visit... Tell me: Do you Christians have priestesses in your cult?

AGNES: No, prefect. But we girls and women may be brides of our Saviour.

THE PREFECT: Have you ever met one of our priestesses?

AGNES: No. Only at school have I seen priestesses around a few times when they were listening to our lessons.

THE PREFECT: Well, the person who visited me today was Marcela, the High Priestess of the Goddess Vesta. She enquired about you in great detail. It seems that when they came to your school to choose those who would become virgins and priestesses of the Goddess Vesta, they immediately took notice of you, for they saw your recollection, your reverence, your devotion.... You seemed to them the perfect choice for such a high honour!

AGNES: Well, today she will know with complete certainty that her wish is unfulfillable. Nor will she herself have that wish any longer.

THE PREFECT: The high priestess Marcela has shown you all her goodwill. She has asked me to convey this generous offer to you.... Listen, Agnes, she is ready to take you under her protection. She offers you the temple district as an asylum. She does not ask you to sacrifice to the Goddess or to any of the Gods. She only wishes you to become acquainted with the temple service as far as

the youngest novices are allowed to go, and that without being admitted to the novitiate. Nor does she ask you to renounce Christ. She only wants to give you the opportunity to get to know the cult of Vesta and expects you to make a decision only after the usual three years.... And if, after three years, you leave the asylum again as a Christian, I hope that the conditions in Rome will be so well ordered that you will no longer be persecuted. Agnes, if you accept the offer of the high priestess, she will come for you this very day and you will be safe in the temple district, and this whole process will be annulled.

AGNES: O Prefect, I am very much afraid that the tempter has availed himself of your goodness, and your goodness has succumbed to this temptation. You want to save my earthly life, and it may be saved in this way. But, Minucius Rufus, I know it, and you know it too, that I can never become a priestess of Vesta. I am a bride of the Lamb. It would be a lie for me to consent to a probationary period of the temple service of Vesta. I have chosen. Tell me, Prefect: wouldn't you despise a bride who abandons her bridegroom? To hope that any other will please me does wrong to my Spouse. I will be his who first chose me for himself

The prefect paces back and forth

THE PREFECT: All hope now crumbles.... *Short silence*
Agnes, Agnes! What am I to do now? You know very well that it is my greatest wish to free you! But it is not only my son who would not allow that. Do you not hear the cries that have been heard for days: "Death to Christians"; "Death to blasphemers"; "Death to Agnes"? The mob is furious and they fear that the gods will vent their wrath on Rome if the Christian sect continues to spread. If I were to release you, they would not only kill me, but sooner or later, with or without a trial, they would kill you too. What choice do I have? To sentence you to death? Look: Although I cannot understand how you could choose such a vile doctrine, I am convinced that a child like you is no danger to Rome. And although I see that you would not fear death, the law does not permit me to apply the death penalty simply to a virgin.... Do you know what that means, Agnes? That

I have no choice but to sentence you to despicable forced labour....

I would have avoided this disgrace to a noble family of Rome, but you resolutely closed every door that was opened to you. Tomorrow I will have to announce the verdict... I am sorry!