

20. January 2023

"Agnes in the wake of the Lamb"

Part III - Unsullied in purity

Scene 12:

THE PREFECT: I open the last session of this trial for the public and solemn pronouncement of the sentence on the accused.
Arise, accused, and hear the sentence which the Supreme Court of Rome will now pronounce upon you!
In the name of the Godly Emperor, the Holy City of Rome and the Roman people. Accused of high treason and blasphemy is the young virgin Agnes, aged 12, daughter of Honorius Placidus and his wife Laurentia. After investigation of all the facts and after impartial and just examination of the person of the accused in her actions and deeds, the degree of her responsibility and the weight of her own statements, we pass this sentence:
The accused is found guilty of blasphemy. Even if the accused claims that the renunciation of our gods does not necessarily entail blasphemy against them, belief in our gods is nevertheless completely incompatible with Christian doctrine. The sentence of the virgin Agnes, accused and convicted of blasphemy, is:
Life-long forced labour of the most despicable kind by serving in a brothel of the lowest grade.

Shouts among the people:

- Burn the Christian! Let the Christian burn! Burn!
- You will all be put to shame by this child. She is the purest innocence itself.
- Shame is not enough! Death to the blasphemer!
- (A voice whispers): Her brave heart will triumph over their twisted minds.

THE PREFECT: Take the prisoner to the brothel!

Voices fade until they stop altogether, music begins

AGNES: *sobbing* Dark night surrounds me, the shivers of horror tremble through my whole body. I know Lord, that even every hair on my head is numbered... and yet.... I look into the darkness, a terrible darkness.... Lord, come to my aid! Do not abandon the pure body of your bride to shame!

AMBROSE: I assure you, brethren, the Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth: he will hear their cry, and will save them (Ps 145:18). While Agnes was stripped of her garment - just as her divine bridegroom was divested on Golgotha - so as to be led, humiliated, to the place of shame, into the house of impurity; behold, her hair grew so long that it covered her pure body like a veil. And as she was brought into the house of dishonour, an angel awaited her there, clothed her in a robe of light, and and so changed the place of sin into a place of prayer... But the more the light of God shines, the more desperately the darkness resists, for it knows that the hour of its judgment is at hand....

Scene 13:

The scene takes place in a taberna, the two men occasionally take an audible sip from their mugs.

CLAUDIUS: Just look at the brilliant defender! You have failed, Aurelius, and so it happens to everyone who seeks to defend the unforgivable!
Now at last my desire is fulfilled.... Everything went like clockwork, just as I had planned from the beginning. Agnes refused to be mine; now she will have to be mine by force.

AURELIUS: Hold on, boy! You've drunk too much! It is too soon to sing of victory. This girl has more powerful defenders than

me.... Have you heard that today, when she was led into the House of Shame, an invisible being stood at the entrance to keep her from being touched by impurity?

CLAUDIUS:

An invisible being! Well, tonight it will have to prove its power, for nothing and no one will stop me.

AURELIUS:

Since I first saw this girl, she has puzzled me so much. Where does her power lie? It is evident that in her presence evil is awakened in some, and good in others.

In you she has apparently awakened evil, in the prison staff apparently good. The more I think about Agnes, the less remarkable she seems. On the outside, she is a typical schoolgirl in the early stages of maturity. Pretty, but not outstanding. Special intellectual gifts? I heard every statement she made at the trial. What was there that was astonishing? Nothing but a certain naivety and a bit of cunning. And yet this power over many people! I see no reasonable cause for this effect. Do you know what it is, Claudius?

CLAUDIUS:

hissing The witch!

AURELIUS:

Beware, beware! I have not noticed any sorcery. Even your love-craziness is your own affair. The girl does not want you at all and therefore has no need to make you love-crazy. No, my boy, she is not a witch! But do not challenge the power that works in her!

CLAUDIUS:

None and nothing shall hinder me in my purpose!

Scene 14:

AMBROSE:

And so this corrupt heart entered on the path to its own judgment. But where darkness thickens and seems certain of victory, God lets his light shine on those who belong to him. Suddenly, as Claudius prepared to cross the threshold of the door to dishonour Agnes, a tall, blinding flame

struck out from the door. But this was no flame. This was a fiery being, a being of light, not a human-like being, but a divine one. Claudius staggered back, cried out and fell dead to the ground (a scream can be heard in the background). Immediately his father, the prefect, came and mourned the lost son... (the prefect can be heard mourning Claudius). He raised the body and laid it at the feet of the Virgin.

THE PREFECT: Agnes, my dear child, what has happened?

a short silence

AGNES: Claudius wanted to defile me. But he whose commandments he wanted to transgress showed his power over him and killed him. God wanted to save him from sin and sent his angel to save him.

THE PREFECT: Do something, Agnes! Do something! Give me back my son!

AGNES: Me?

THE PREFECT: Did you not say that the breath of your beloved's mouth brings the dead back to life?

AMBROSE: The girl knelt trembling before the corpse, crossed her arms over her breast and silently and humbly invoked the God of the living and the dead.

AGNES: O Lamb of God, have mercy on us! O Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. (She repeats it three times as Ambrose speaks, and on the third time Claudius' voice joins in).

AMBROSE: And behold, the breath returned to the the one who was dead, so that he rose up. And having recovered life, not only of the body, but much more of the spirit, he joined in the Virgin's prayer.

CLAUDIUS:

O Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

A short silence

CLAUDIUS:

I confess your God and mine, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.