

21. January 2023

"Agnes in the wake of the Lamb"

Part IV - Faithful unto death

Scene 15:

AMBROSE: Brethren, remember ye what Abraham said in the parable of the rich man: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead". (Luke 16:31). Well, that is exactly what happened when Claudius had been raised from death. That generation, which had not believed the eloquent testimony of so many martyrs, repented not of their deeds at the sight of that mighty sign, nor did they give glory to the God of heaven (Rev 16:9, 11). Rather, just as the Pharisees in their day wanted to eliminate the testimony of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, so the idolotrous priests sent Claudius into exile to silence this living testimony for Christ. His father Minucius Rufus, prefect and supreme judge of Rome, when he saw such a great miracle, wanted to save Agnes again; but he feared the wrath of the people and handed over his office into the hands of his representative, named Aspasius.

A cry in the crowd: Kill the witch who hexes the senses of men and transforms souls.

AMBROSE: The unjust judge reopened the trial against Agnes in a summary process, now accusing her of witchcraft. Trampling all the foundations of law underfoot, he pronounced the sentence on the very same day: the virgin Agnes was to die at the stake in public exhibition....

AURELIUS:

in a letter to Agnes' parents:

Aurelius Valerianus, defender of the Virgin Agnes, to Honorius Placidus and his wife Laurencia.

In view of the fact that you did not wish to be present at your daughter's torments of death, I would like to comply with your wish to give you a detailed account of her last moments:

At the ninth hour the circus began to fill up. Agnes, meanwhile, was in a dungeon in the vaults of the circus, garbed in a white robe. The pyre had already been erected in the arena.... Suddenly there was a commotion in the tribune. A woman pushed forward to get a place near the pyre, shouting loudly:

CRESCENTIA: There must be at least one to comfort her!

ANOTHER *protests*: You're not the only one, there are many of us!

AURELIUS: I was now charged with leading her into the arena. When I entered her cell, I found her on her knees and could hear her whispering:

AGNES: Lord, if this cup may not pass from me, except I drink it, thy will be done; but strengthen this thy little and helpless daughter!

AURELIUS: Almost without daring to interrupt her fervent supplication, I softly opened the door and said, "Agnes, the time has come."

AGNES: Not time; eternity.

Footsteps and chains are heard, as well as shouts from the tribune.

HENCHMAN: Put the torches to the wood!

CRIES: Look! Look! The fire splits in the middle!
Do you also see what I see, or do my eyes deceive me?
The virgin is unharmed!

AURELIUS: *writes further*: Indeed, there she was, in the midst of the fire, arms outstretched in the shape of a cross, absorbed in prayer. Suddenly she descended from the pyre, and behold, not a hair of her head was scorched by the flames.

CRIE: She is a witch!

JUDGE SHOUTS: Executioner: Behead her!

AGNES: Agnus... Dei...

The swift swing of the sword is heard, the crowd gradually falls silent. Then only music..

AURELIUS: *his voice sounds broken:*

With great pangs of woe, but at the same time with a peace incomprehensible to me, I break off the narration... My strength fails me.

AMBROSE: Still too young to be punished, yet old enough for victory; girls of her age cannot bear so much as their parents' frowns, and when pricked by a needle, weep as for a serious wound. Yet she shows no fear of the blood-stained hands of her executioners. She stands undaunted by heavy, clanking chains. She offers her whole body to be put to the sword by fierce soldiers. She is too young to know of death, yet is ready to face it.

You could see fear in the eyes of the executioner, as if he were the one condemned; his right hand trembled, his face grew pale as he prepared to strike the blow against the girl, who had no fear for herself. In the midst of tears, she sheds no tears herself. The crowds marvel at her recklessness in throwing away her life untasted, as if she had already lived life to the full.

For what is beyond the power of nature, they argue, must come from its creator. How else can such a stout-heartedness be explained than by the action of the spirit of strength?

One victim, but a twin martyrdom, one of purity and one of faith; Agnes preserved her virginity, and gained a martyr's crown, by following the Lamb wherever he went.

In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.

SCENE 16

PRESBYTER PAULINUS: *makes his way to Bishop Ambrose just as he has finished the ceremony. Breathes heavily.*

Pater Ambrosie! Father Ambrose! ... Just today I arrived in Mediolanum, and I was told that I should not miss your sermon on this feast day. And indeed, although I know this story so well, I was moved to tears when I heard it from your lips today.... And now I ask you to listen to my story for a moment! Don't worry, we are both in a hurry. I promise to be brief!

AMBROSE: Come. Sit down. And before I listen to your story, I would like to ask you who you are and where you come from!

PR. PAULINUS: I am Paulinus, a priest of Rome. Imagine! The church in my charge happens to be dedicated to St. Agnes; it was built over her tomb outside the walls of Rome.

And now listen: some time ago the temptations of the flesh overcame me with such force that I decided - in order not to dishonour my priesthood - to go to the Supreme Pontiff, to ask him to relieve me of my office and to allow me to enter into marriage. The Holy Father gave me a ring and said to me: "Paulinus, go before the image of Saint Agnes, which is venerated in your church, and tell her that you come on behalf of the Pope to ask her to accept you as her bridegroom". You can imagine that my first reaction was not at all enthusiastic; but, in an act of faith, I followed the Holy Father's advice exactly.... And, you won't believe it: when I held out the ring to her, proposing marriage, so to speak, the image stretched out its arm, took the ring and put it on its finger. Immediately all the temptations that had beset me ceased, and they have not returned since.... And if you don't want to believe me, come and visit our church of St. Agnes. You will find that the ring can still be seen on her image!

AMBROSE: I accept your invitation! I hope to make a pilgrimage soon.... This little girl has captivated me, she has conquered my heart. I must admit that the story you have just told me has almost made me jealous!

PR. PAULINUS: No need for that, most venerable father! Rather, I believe that now, in heaven, she has a heart for us all! But now, Father Ambrose, I must depart, for if I could not preside over the celebration of St. Agnes today, the day of our church's great patronal feast, I must at least arrive in time for the day of St. Emerentiana, the girl with whom Agnes shared a wet nurse. I will never forget how my grandparents told me about her glorious death: They themselves were among the group of people who came to St Agnes' tomb just a few days after her martyrdom. A horde of pagans cornered them and began to pelt them with stones, so that the group that had come to pray had to disperse. But from a distance, my grandparents saw that someone remained there, immovable, praying: it was little Emerentiana, who, just as she had been in life inseparable from Agnes, so she was also in death. The implacable pagans stoned her to death. And so, the one who was barely a catechumen, received the baptism of blood and, just as she had seen in her dream, marched hand in hand with Agnes to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.