

24// OF SAINT AGNES

The blessed virgin St. Agnes was much wise, and well taught, as St. Ambrose witnesseth, and wrote her passion. She was fair of visage, but much fairer in the Christian faith, she was young of age, and aged in wit, for in the thirteenth year of her age she lost the death that the world giveth, and found life in Jesu Christ, which when she came from school the son of the prefect of Rome, for the emperor, loved her, and when his father and mother knew it, they offered to give much riches with him if he might have her in marriage, and offered to St. Agnes precious gems and jewels, which she refused to take, whereof it happed that the young man was ardently esprised in the love of St. Agnes, and came again and took with him more precious and richer adornments, made with all manner of precious stones, and as well by his parents as by himself offered to St. Agnes rich gifts and possessions, and all the delights and deduits of the world, and all to the end to have her in marriage.

ST. AGNES REJECTS THE SUIT OF THE PREFECT'S SON

But St. Agnes answered to him in this matter:
Go from me thou fardel of sin, nourishing of evils and morsel of death, and depart, and know thou that I am prevented and am loved of another lover, which hath given to me many better jewels, which hath fianced me by his faith, and is much more noble of lineage than thou art, and of estate. He hath clad me with precious stones and with jewels of gold, he hath set in my visage a sign that I receive none other espouse but him, and hath showed me over-great treasures which he must give me if I abide with him. I will have none other spouse but him, I will seek none other, in no manner may I leave him, with him am I firm and fastened in love, which is more noble, more puissant and fairer than any other, whose love is much sweet and gracious, of whom the chamber is now for to receive me where the virgins sing merrily. I am now embraced of him of whom the mother is a virgin, and his father knew never woman, to whom the angels serve. The sun and the moon marvel them of his beauty, whose works never fail, whose riches never minish, by whose odour dead men rise again to life, by whose touching the sick men be comforted, whose love is chastity. To him I have given my faith, to him I have commanded my heart; when I love him then am I chaste, and when I touch him then am I pure and clean, and when I take him then am I a virgin, this is the love of my God.

Agnes is said of agna a lamb, for she was humble and debonair as a lamb, or of agnos in Greek, which is to say debonair and piteous, for she was debonair and merciful. Or Agnes of agnoscendo, for she knew the way of truth, and after this St. Austin saith, truth is opposed against vanity, falseness, and doubleness, for these three things were taken from her for the truth that she had.

When the young man had heard all this he was despaired, as he that was taken in blind love, and was over sore tormented, in so much that he lay down sick in his bed for the great sorrow that he had. Then came the physicians and anon knew his malady, and said to his father that he languished of carnal love that he had to some woman. Then the father enquired and knew

that it was this woman, and did do speak to St. Agnes for his son, and said to her how his son languished for her love.

St. Agnes answered that in no wise she would break the faith of her first husband. Upon that the provost demanded who was her first husband, of whom she so much avaulted, and in his power so much trusted. Then one of her servants said she was Christian, and that she was so enchanted that she said Jesu Christ was her espouse.

ST. AGNES TAKEN BEFORE THE PREFECT

And when the provost heard that she was Christian the provost was much glad because to have power on her, for then the Christian people were in the will of the lord, and if they would not reny their God and their belief all their goods should be forfeited. Wherefore then the provost made St. Agnes to come in justice and he examined her sweetly, and after cruelly by menaces.

St. Agnes, well comforted, said to him: Do what thou wilt, for my purpose shalt thou never change. And when she saw him now flattering and now terribly angry she scorned him.

And the provost said to her, being all angry: One of two things thou shalt choose, either do sacrifice to our gods with the virgins of the goddess Vesta, or go to the bordel to be abandoned to all that thither come, to the great shame and blame of all thy lineage.

St. Agnes answered: If thou knewest who is my God thou wouldst not say to me such words, but for as much as I know the virtue of my God, I set nothing by thy menaces, for I have his angel which is keeper of my body.

SAINT AGNES IN THE BROTHEL

Then the judge all araged made to take off her clothes, and all naked to be led to the bordel. And thus St. Agnes that refused to do sacrifice to the idols, was delivered naked to go to the bordel, but anon as she was unclothed God gave to her such grace that the hairs of her head became so long that they covered all her body to her feet, so that her body was not seen. And when St. Agnes entered into the bordel anon she found the angel of God ready for to defend her, and environed St. Agnes with a bright clearness in such wise that no man might see her ne come to her.

Then made she of the bordel her oratory, and in making her prayers to God she saw tofore her a white vesture, and anon therewith she clad her and said: I thank thee Jesu Christ which accountest me with thy virgins and hast sent me this vesture. All they that entered made honour and reverence to the great clearness that they saw about St. Agnes, and came out more devout and more clean than they entered.

At last came the son of the provost with a great company for to accomplish his foul desires and lusts. And when he saw his fellows come out and issue all abashed, he mocked them and called them cowards. And then he, all araged, entered for to accomplish his evil will. And

when he came to the clearness, he advanced him for to take the virgin, and anon the devil took him by the throat and strangled him that he fell down dead.

SHE RAISES THE DEAD SUITOR

And when the provost heard these tidings of his son he ran weeping to the bordel, and began crying, to say to St. Agnes: O thou cruel woman, why hast thou showed thy enchantment on my son? and demanded of her how his son was dead, and by what cause.

To whom St. Agnes answered: He took him into his power to whom he had abandoned his will.

Why be not all they dead, said he, that entered here tofore him?

[St. Agnes replied,] For his fellows saw the miracle of the great clearness and were afeard and went their way unhurt, for they did honour to my God which hath clad me with this vestment and hath kept my body, but your villainous son, as soon as he entered into this house began to bray and cry, and when he would have laid hand upon me, anon the devil slew him as thou seest.

If thou mayst raise him, said he, it may well appear that thou hast not put him to death.

And St. Agnes answered: How well that thy creance is not worthy to impetre ne get that of our Lord, nevertheless because it is time that the virtue of God be showed, go ye all out that I may make my prayer to God.

And when she was on her prayers the angel came and raised him to life, and anon he went out and began to cry, with a loud voice, that the God of Christian men was very God in heaven, and in earth, and in the sea, and that the idols were vain that they worshipped, which might not help them ne none other.

Then the bishops of the idols made a great discord among the people, so that all they cried: Take away this sorceress and witch that turned men's minds and alieneth their wits.

HER MARTYRDOM

When the provost saw these marvels he would gladly have delivered St. Agnes because she had raised his son, but he doubted to be banished, and set in his place a lieutenant named Aspasius for to satisfy the people, and because he could not deliver her he departed sorrowfully. This Aspasius did do make a great fire among all the people and did do cast St. Agnes therein. Anon as this was done the flame departed in two parts, and burnt them that made the discords, and she abode all whole without feeling the fire. The people weened that she had done all by enchantment.

Then made St. Agnes her orison to God thanking him that she was escaped from the peril to lose her virginity, and also from the burning of the flame. And when she had made her orison

the fire lost all his heat, and quenched it. Aspasius, for the doubtance of the people, commanded to put a sword in her body, and so she was martyred.

Anon came the Christian men and the parents of St. Agnes and buried the body, but the heathen defended it, and cast so stones at them, that unnethe they escaped. She suffered martyrdom in the time of Constantine the great, which began to reign the year of our Lord three hundred and nine.

MIRACLES OF ST. AGNES

St. Emerantia

Among them that buried her body was one Emerentiana which had been fellow to St. Agnes, how be it she was not yet christened, but an holy virgin, she came also to the sepulchre of St. Agnes, which constantly reproved the gentiles, and of them she was stoned to death and slain. Anon there came an earthquaver, lightning and thunder, that many of the paynims perished, so that forthon the Christian people might surely come to the sepulchre unhurt, and the body of Emerentiana was buried by the body of St. Agnes.

The Vision of Saint Agnes

It happed that when the friends of St. Agnes watched at her sepulchre on a night, they saw a great multitude of virgins clad in vestments of gold and silver, and a great light shone tofore them, and on the right side was a lamb more white than snow, and saw also St. Agnes among the virgins which said to her parents: Take heed and see that ye bewail me no more as dead, but be ye joyful with me, for with all these virgins Jesu Christ hath given me most brightest habitation and dwelling, and am with him joined in heaven whom in earth I loved with [all] my thought. And this was the eighth day after her passion. And because of this vision holy church maketh memory of her the eight days of the feast after, which is called Agnetis secundo.

The Ring for the Priest Paulus

Of her we read an example that in the church of St. Agnes was a priest which was named Paulus and always served in that church, and had right great temptation of his flesh, but because he doubted to anger our Lord he kept him from sin, and prayed to the pope that he would give him leave for to marry. The pope considered his simpleness, and for his bounty he gave him a ring in which was an emerald, and commanded that he should go to the image of St. Agnes which was in his church, and pray her that she would be his wife. This simple man did so, and the image put forth her finger and he set the ring thereon, and then she drew her finger again and kept the ring fast. And then anon all his temptation carnal was quenched and taken away from him, and yet as it is said the ring is on the finger of the image.

The Cure of Constance the Leper

Constance the daughter of Constantine was smitten with a sore and foul leprosy. When she had heard of the vision of St. Agnes, at her tomb showed to her friends, she came to the sepulchre of

St. Agnes, and when she was in her prayers she fell asleep, and she saw in her sleep, St. Agnes saying to her: Constance, work constantly, and if thou wilt believe in Christ, thou shalt anon be delivered of thy sickness, wherewith she awoke and found herself perfectly whole, and anon she received baptism, and founded a church upon the body of the virgin and there abode in her virginity, and assembled there many virgins, because of her good example.

A Ring from the Pope

In another place it is read that when the church of St. Agnes was void, the pope said to a priest that he would give to him a wife for to nourish and keep, and he meant to commit the church of St. Agnes to his cure. And he delivered to him a ring and bade him to wed the image, and the image put forth her finger and he set on it a ring and anon she closed the finger to her hand and kept the ring, and so he espoused her.

COMMENTS OF ST. AMBROSE

Of this virgin saith St. Ambrose in the book of virgins: This virgin, young men, old men and children praise, there is none more to be praised than that may be praised of all. St. Ambrose saith in his preface that this blessed St. Agnes despised the delights of noblesse, and deserved heavenly dignity, she left the desires of man's fellowship, and she found the fellowship of the everlasting King. And she, receiving a precious death for the confession of Jesu Christ, is made conformable to him everlastingly, to reign in joy in heaven, to the which he bring us for whose glorious name and faith this glorious virgin St. Agnes suffered martyrdom of death.

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halsall@fordham.edu

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