

AN ANCIENT MARTYR SPEAKS: A POWERFUL EXAMPLE FOR PURITY

For several reasons, the **Feast of Saint Agnes** (January 21) holds a place close to my heart. According to St. Augustine, Agnes was just **thirteen years old** when she was martyred. I thought of her when reading about the remarkable courage of **Jayne Closs** from Barron, WI, also just 13 years of age. Jayne escaped her tormentor with an act of tremendous courage. Evidence suggests that Agnes was revered from the earliest days after her death. Her witness, then as now, is a powerful reminder of what God can accomplish in those who love Him to the end. In the face of mortal threats, this young teenager faced down her tormenters with a firm resolve. In this she can serve as a **model** for not only **young women** to be people of courage, but for all Christians.

We need courage today perhaps more than other virtues, because the challenges to our Catholic way of life are great. At times, the attacks are quite subtle, under the radar. We are effectively told, “Just keep your faith within those four walls and there will be no problems.” Sometimes the threats are the by-products of our own weaknesses in the flesh. We struggle with the virtue of purity, thinking that it is just easier to go along with what seems to be accepted cultural mores. Yet, God chooses the weak and works powerfully through them. The name **Agnes** in Greek means ‘**chaste**’ while in Latin signifies a ‘**lamb**’. She represents all that is pure and virtuous in womanhood. (St. Augustine, *Sermon 274*). She rejected the advances of the son of a high Roman official with the words: “The one to whom I am betrothed is Christ whom the angels serve. He was the first to choose me. I shall be His alone.” For this, Agnes was quickly denounced as a Christian.

If bad habits are not attacked early on, they can become perpetual struggles well beyond adolescence, and this is the cause of great moral and spiritual despair for many a faith-filled Catholic. The grace of the sacraments will always be there for us, but it takes real and consistent effort. Young people have to want to live a life of chastity and must pray for it, though not quite like St. Augustine: “Grant to me chastity and continence, but not yet.” (*Confessions* 8.7.17) Youth is **neither a handicap nor an obstacle** to holiness and virtue; rather, it is precisely where it may be found. May the young people realize that their own example of faith, virtue and service does not go unnoticed. Saint Agnes died on account of her innocence, as she refused to surrender it to a would-be suitor. When he found out that she refused his advances, he reported her to the authorities, and she was arrested. The martyrdom of an innocent girl made a deep impression upon a society enslaved to a materialistic outlook.

The Church’s most ancient liturgical calendar (354 A.D.)— the Deposit of Martyrs— lists January 21 (Agnētis in Nomentana) as the day of her martyrdom, and her feast day has never shifted. It even names the street where she was buried, the **Via Nomentana**—exactly the same street where her Basilica may be found today. Time moves forward, but some things stay the same, and there is comfort in tradition. Nor has her influence and example diminished over the years. Not many people in imperial Rome would take seriously a child, yet it did not take long for Agnes of Rome to become revered with significant honors. Saint Ambrose specifically mentioned her in his treatise on *De Virginitate* (he says she was 12) as well as in a hymn he composed in her honor, *Agnes beatae virginis*. **Constantina**— Constantine’s daughter— had a strong devotion to Agnes. A basilica was constructed in her honor fewer than forty years after her death, built next to and not over the tomb. Only the outer walls remain, but Pope Honorius built a “new” Basilica in the 7th century, this time directly over her tomb.

We need her intercession today, for her witness is an invaluable and timely one, as we mark on Tuesday the sad and horrific **46th anniversary** of *Roe vs. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion. There is some encouraging news to report. The number of abortions nationwide stands at 926,000, down since peaking at 1.6 million in 1990. Still, it represents **three times the entire population** of Saint Paul (pop. 306,621) each year. We should be grateful that the number of deaths is declining but also realize that this is still the killing of innocent lives. Yet it is this very virtue of innocence which ironically represents our way out. Saint Agnes’ complete trust in God teaches us that sanctity and wisdom does not only depend on length of years. It is a gift from God. Our society’s way out of hedonism is to recapture some sense of innocence and to assiduously guard the virtue of chastity in our young. This will happen only when we see the primacy of self-giving love. This gift

of love is the pearl of great price, for it gives ultimate meaning to our lives.

In a message to organizers of the **March for Life** in Paris, Pope Francis noted, “all the evil in the world is summed up by contempt for life.” He added “Despite attempts to trivialize abortion this gesture poses a true case of conscience to the whole civil society.” The right to life is the foundation for all the other rights in society. I encourage you to perform some acts of prayer and penance on January 22, including fasting between meals or abstaining from meat. This is both in reparation for crimes against dignity caused by abortion and in intercession to God to grant wisdom to our nation and civil leaders, that they may know and protect life from the very moment of conception.

- No, I am not A.W.O.L. from the Cathedral today, but am returning from the **March for Life in Washington D.C.** I have always wanted to attend; I am accompanying the Archdiocesan group of young people. As you read this, four deluxe motor coaches are making their way back to the Cathedral. I have not been on an all-night bus trip in 25 years, nor have I ever considered dining at a Golden Corral!
- I am profoundly grateful for all your prayers and words of support on the occasion of the death of my dad, **Dr. Frank Ubel**. He lived a long life of 94 years and was buried last Saturday at my home parish of Nativity. Someday, I'll write a column about the many lessons he taught me. For now, God's grace has helped me to process the incredible mixture of grief and gratitude. From his grave at Calvary Cemetery is a beautiful view, both of the Cathedral and Saint Agnes, my two favorite churches! *Requiescat in pace.*
- Our own local **Prayer Service for Life** at the Cathedral takes place Tuesday, January 22 at 10:30 a.m. It is followed by a Rally at the State Capitol at Noon, sponsored by Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life. I hope you may be able to join us— Archbishop Hebda is leading the Prayer Service this year.
- The weather outside is frightful. Snow or no snow, the cold is here. Our January heat bill is typically our worst— typically \$10,000. I am so grateful for your assistance with our January second collection to help defray the heating costs here at the Cathedral.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel

Rector