

St. Agnes

Agnes was born at the end of the second century and was raised in the pagan city of Rome. It was a time when Christians could only survive by living underground. In fact, the pagan emperors, who dressed in fine purple garments adorned with gold and jewels, would often host large banquets and entertain important guests by sending Christians to the lions for sport.

The parents of Agnes were of an ancient and noble family so no one supposed they were followers of Christ. Since churches were forbidden, believers would gather in each other's homes—undoubtedly in Agnes'—for weekly worship. Unlike her companions who wore extravagant clothes and jewels, Agnes rejected any form of vanity, preferring a plain white robe. Her pagan friends could never understand her Christian witness robed as a child-spouse of Christ Jesus.

The young noblemen of Rome actively competed for the hand of Agnes. However, she rejected all proposals of marriage and consecrated her virginity to a "heavenly spouse." In frustration and retaliation her suitors accused her of being a Christian.

We learn from St. Ambrose and St. Augustine that Agnes was only 13 years old when the Emperor Diocletian announced the persecution of all Christians. In January 304, she was taken before the Roman tribunal to answer to the single accusation of being a follower of Christ. She was commanded to offer incense to pagan gods but merely made the sign of the cross. Exasperated by her courage and constancy, the tribunal ordered her to be beheaded. St. Ambrose tells us that Agnes "went to the place of execution more cheerful than others go to their wedding."

Her body was buried a short distance from Rome (outside the wall), on the road called the "Nomentan Way." A church was later built over her grave during the reign of Constantine and was renewed by Pope Honorius in 625.

Our patron's name, Agnes, signifies *chaste* in Greek and *lamb* in Latin. On the Feast of St. Agnes (January 21), two lambs are blessed by the Holy Father, one decorated in red (martyrdom), the other one decorated in white (purity). They are then taken to the Convent of St. Cecilia where the nuns shear their wool to weave pallia. On June 29, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the pope confers a pallium on each new metropolitan (archbishop).