

## Saint Agnes

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SAINT OF THE DAY

21\_01\_2021



"Virginité merits praise not because it is found in martyrs, but because it forms martyrs", wrote Saint Ambrose (340-397) in *De Virginitate*, speaking of Agnes, the Roman girl killed for her Christian faith when she was barely 13, and whose martyrdom made a profound impression on the Christian community, giving rise to a fervent popular piety. The exact year of her birth into heaven is uncertain, but her martyrdom is likely to have occurred during the Great Persecution of Diocletian (around 305), a few years before Christians obtained freedom of worship. Certainly, the veneration of Saint Agnes was already

widespread even before Ambrose, as emerges from the *Depositio Martyrum* of 336, the ancient calendar of the Church of Rome in which her burial on the via Nomentana is indicated on January 21st.

**The best-known hagiographic source is a 5th century Latin *Passio***, based on oral tradition, according to which Agnes, who was born of a noble Christian family of Rome, had consecrated her virginity to Christ, being inflamed with love for him from a very tender age. Eager to abide by her vow, she rejected the prefect's young son who had fallen in love with her; for this reason, she was denounced as a Christian and stripped in public, but managed to cover herself with an ultimate act of modesty. According to the hymn to Agnes contained in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* (c. 348-410), the Saint had been exhibited in a brothel, where none of the patrons dared to approach her, except a young man of evil intent, who was blinded by the glow of an angel but later recovered his sight through the intercession of Agnes herself.

**Agnes was killed by either beheading or jugulation:** that is, her throat was cut in the way lambs were killed (otherwise, according to a poem by Saint Damasus, she was martyred at the stake). For this reason, artists have often portrayed her in the company of this animal, a symbol of innocence also connected with the name Agnes, which means "pure, chaste". In this regard, Ambrose, again, exalted her eternal glory: "In devotion, beyond her age; in virtue, above nature: she seems to me to have borne not so much a human name, as a token of martyrdom, whereby she showed what she was to be. [...] You have then in one victim a twofold martyrdom, of modesty and of religion."

**Saint Agnes** has the privilege of being among the seven ancient martyrs – together with Lucy, Agatha, Anastasia, Cecilia, Felicita and Perpetua – to have her name included in the Roman Canon. Among her keenest devotees was Saint Costance (318-354), daughter of Emperor Constantine, who was miraculously healed after visiting her tomb and, out of gratitude, had a basilica built (today's Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, rebuilt in the 7th century) over the Catacombs which were later dedicated to her.

**Patroness of:** fiancées, gardeners, girls, virgins; Daughters of Mary, Order of the Holy Trinity.