

## Reflection for January 21, 2017

By Sister Alice Ann Pfeifer, CSA

Jesus came with his disciples into the house.  
Again the crowd gathered,  
making it impossible for them even to eat.  
When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him,  
for they said, "He is out of his mind."

[MK 3:20-21](#)

This Gospel passage, just like the life of St. Agnes, is short and direct in its message. And here's the message. Although it may *look* crazy, it never is crazy to do exactly what you were sent into this world to do. Both Jesus and Agnes were born to give witness to the all-consuming power of God's love.

We know quite a bit about Jesus and the world he entered, but what about Agnes and her world? Near the end of the third century, the Roman Empire extended as far west as the British Isles and as far east as present-day Turkey. But for the very reason of its vast size, the empire was in decline: too much territory, too few resources to hold it together. Diocletian saw this when he rose to power in the year 284, so one of his first acts was to delegate the management of half his empire to his son-in-law, Maximian. Over the following years, Diocletian, Maximian, and two other Roman generals fought numerous battles to defend lands held by Rome. After a long string of military successes, Diocletian won his last major battle in northern Africa in 298—when Agnes was only six years old.

And what was Christianity like in the time of Agnes? Eusebius, the early Greek historian, says that by then there were 40 openly functioning Christian churches in Rome. According to modern sociologist Rodney Starck, the Roman Empire included more than 6 million Christians, who accounted for more than 10% of its population. One reason he cites for Christianity's great success was the appeal it had to rich and poor alike. Among the wealthy of Rome, Agnes's own family were committed Christians, and as such, they distinguished themselves from other Romans by their generosity to the poor, their commitment to the teachings of Christ, and their weekly participation in the Eucharist—which at that time was celebrated in Greek, the same language of the Christian New Testament. At that time in church history, Agnes would have been baptized either as a baby or as a young girl, almost certainly by a deaconess. It was common practice for deaconesses to catechize and baptize the women and girls. Deacons took care of the men and boys. This makes complete sense when you realize that early Christian baptismal rites required shedding all your clothing, being rubbed down with sacred oils, stepping into a public pool, being plunged underwater three times as the minister spoke the words of Baptism, and emerging from the water to be dressed in a new white baptismal garment. Deaconesses maintained a strong role in the church for as long as Baptism was administered in this way. Of course they had other duties as well, probably the same ones that deacons had.

Besides serving as deaconesses, women also could become consecrated virgins. These were young women who felt a bond with Christ so strong that they wanted to forego marriage to dedicate their lives totally to him. At that time the faith of Christians in general was deeply Christ-centered. One image painted in the catacombs—in fact the first-ever image of Christ to appear in Christian art—showed him as a young beardless shepherd boy. Perhaps because her own name meant “lamb,” Agnes imagined herself as one of the lambs standing by his side or carried on his shoulders. For young women like Agnes, consecrated virginity was a lifetime commitment marked by a liturgical ceremony as solemn as the ordination of a priest. Only a bishop could perform the rite. After making her consecration, a young maiden thereafter wore the veil of a married woman and was considered a spouse of Christ. The consecrated woman continued to live with her family but devoted extra hours of the day to prayer and to charitable works. Usually a Christian girl made this commitment in consultation with her parents, sometimes when as young as ten or twelve years old. It was only later in church history that a woman had to be at least 25 to make this choice.

So here was Agnes, reaching the age of twelve or thirteen and making this unusual decision for her future. That she did so during dangerous times makes her choice all the more remarkable. Why dangerous? After leading his last charge on a distant battlefield, Diocletian was determined, if you will, to make Rome great again. It was only then that he entered Rome for the *first* time in his life. He reorganized the central government, raised taxes, improved tax collection methods, and fixed the prices of goods and services to contain inflation. He also made plans to reinvigorate Rome’s old-time religion. He believed the empire’s struggling economy was the result of angering the gods, who disapproved of Rome’s tolerance for Christianity. To appease these gods, Diocletian started small. In 297 he ordered every soldier and every government official in Rome to make public sacrifices to the gods. Those who refused were promptly ordered to resign. Later he proclaimed a large-scale purge of Christianity itself. He commanded the destruction of every Christian church and the burning of all Christian literature. Church leaders were rounded up and ordered to sacrifice to the Roman deities or else suffer torture and death.

Legend says that Rome might never have known that Agnes was Christian if she had not been reported by a young man she refused to marry. We’ll never know exactly what Agnes said to her captors and where in Rome she died and how, because nothing was written until 70 years after her death. (It took decades, by the way, before anything was written about Christ after *his* death, too.) By then, a variety of oral traditions about Agnes were in circulation. But it *is* known that at the time she died, authorities respected her family enough to allow for her burial in the family crypt. Ordinarily the bodies of executed Christians were tossed into the Tiber to serve as a public warning.

And we also know her burial place soon became a shrine where Christians flocked to pray. When they gathered for Eucharist, they began including her name in a litany of saints that also mentioned Perpetua and Felicity, married women who had been executed exactly 100 years earlier in Carthage. When the daughter of Constantine later visited the tomb of Agnes, she was cured of leprosy and insisted that a church be built on the spot. Constantine’s father, by the way, was Diocletian, but the son famously reversed his father’s anti-Christian policies. If Agnes had survived Rome’s last great persecution under Diocletian, she would have turned 21 the year that Rome finally legalized Christianity for once and for all.

But Agnes was chosen to live and die exactly as she did—confusing the wise ones of the world with her crazy love for Christ, confounding the strong ones of the world with her preference for his humble, gentle, and nonviolent ways. Her world, shaped by an expanding yet crumbling empire, was not so different from our own, and God knows that our world, too, cries out for witnesses to the *real* glory and the *real* power that comes with serving Christ Jesus and his little ones—no matter their color, no matter their gender, no matter their status in civil society. Today Agnes reminds us: *we have work to do*. Whether we devote ourselves to the quiet witness of prayer or to public witness in the city square, let us follow her lead. Let us stand up for Christ— and keep working for the day when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.