

“Purity and Courage: the Double-Edged Sword that Pierces the Culture of Death”

Homily for the Mass for the Walk for Life (2017)

Memorial of St. Agnes

Introduction

Earlier this morning in Rome Mass was celebrated in the Basilica of St. Agnes in which pure white lambs were brought up in a procession and blessed, and then taken to a convent of Benedictine nuns where they will be cared for until they are shorn later this year. Those prelates who were named archbishops the previous year receive the pallium made from the wool of these lambs, the special vestment the archbishop wears over his chasuble as a sign of his unity with Peter and his successor, the Pope. To underscore this communion, the pallia are left at the tomb of St. Peter under the high altar in St. Peter’s Basilica until the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, when they are then able to be received by the new archbishops.

Lessons from the Life of St. Agnes

This ancient tradition derives from the name of the saint whose memory we honor today, Agnes, which comes from the word “agnus” in Latin, meaning “lamb.” Agnes is one of those extraordinary saints in the ancient history of the Church who was both a virgin and a martyr. She lived around the year 300, a time when the Christian faith was looked upon with scorn by those who had power in the society of the time.

The story has it that she was very beautiful and belonged to a wealthy family, and although she was highly sought after for marriage, her love for Jesus Christ was so great that at the young age of thirteen-years-old she consecrated herself to him, belonging to him and him alone. Her suitors were so angry at her for her refusal of their proposals for

marriage that, to get revenge on her, they denounced her to the authorities as a Christian. However, pressure, persuasion, attempts to violate her integrity and threats of torture could not break her resolve, so great was her love of her true Spouse. She was eventually put to death by the sword, but not before she announced to her persecutors: “You may stain your sword with my blood, but you will never be able to profane my body, consecrated to Christ.” Such undaunted courage, and at such a tender young age. That is why she is typically depicted in Christian art with a lamb and a palm branch, to signify her double victory of purity and martyrdom.

Purity and the courage of a martyr: are not those the virtues we need if we wish to build a culture of life? We all know this is, ultimately, a spiritual battle: St. Agnes teaches us by her life the lessons taught in these readings we just heard proclaimed for her feast day. She found the pearl of great price in her one love, Jesus Christ. She recognized the foolishness of worldly allurements, and forsook them all to give her life exclusively to him. This, indeed, is foolishness in the eyes of the world, as St. Paul tells us. But for those who can see with the eyes of faith, this is the wisdom of God, which is a *person*, Jesus Christ. He “became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.”

Trust in Jesus Christ

We must, then, be engaged in this effort on the spiritual level: our hope is in Jesus Christ, not in the powers of this world. Scripture tells us in Psalm 146: “Put no trust in princes, in children of Adam powerless to save. Who breathing his last, returns to the earth; that day all his planning comes to nothing”; and in Psalm 52: “Why do you glory in what is evil, you who are mighty by the mercy of God? ... The righteous will see and ...

will laugh at him: ‘Behold the man! He did not take God as his refuge, but he trusted in the abundance of his wealth’”

God’s people of old felt the same temptation we do: to trust in worldly power, whether it be political, monetary, military, popularity, or any other kind. We must avoid that temptation, and trust in Jesus Christ, be rooted in him. This, of course, does not mean that we should remain uninvolved in temporal affairs, much less allow ourselves to be gullible. We must seize the opportunities we have, and partner with those who have power in the worldly sense to build a culture of life in service to the common good. We are happy to do so and are thankful to them for the opportunity. Being engaged in the temporal realm is, after all, why we are here today, and why we will walk this afternoon. But notice that we *precede* the Rally and Walk with this Mass. There is more than just a practical purpose to this: we must always put the spiritual first, Jesus Christ must have the first place and center place in our lives.

He is the one who gives us the virtue we need to witness to, and be messengers, of life in midst of so many forces destructive of human life and dignity. He gives us the necessary grace of purity, for if we are tainted by the moral corruption that surrounds us – in our behavior and attitudes, in what we look at and what we say, in how we spend our time and our money – then we are compromised. We will inspire no one. We will have betrayed our Lord.

And he gives us the necessary grace of courage. True, we are blessed where we live (unlike other parts of the world at this time) that it is unlikely that anyone will put a sword to our neck or point a gun to our head and ask us to explicitly renounce our faith in Jesus Christ. But when we fail to speak out on behalf of the sanctity of human life, of the beauty of God’s plan, woven into the very design of creation, of how new life comes about and is to be welcomed into this world; when instead we cower, and allow ourselves

to be intimidated into silence: have we not also betrayed our Lord? He is the one to give us the grace of courage, the courage of a martyr, even in those little miniscule martyrdoms to which he calls us every day.

St. Agnes demonstrates for us the truth, and even practical effectiveness, of this teaching in a big way: it was reported that those who watched her execution were moved to tears to see such a beautiful young child shackled and fearlessly allow herself to be put to death. So much so that the remark of St. Ambrose about this scene has become deeply embedded in the Church's tradition of the accounts of the saints, that St. Agnes "went to the place of execution more cheerfully than others go to their wedding."

So, yes, while we need political strategizing and prudent use of the things of this world in our effort to build up greater respect for life, at the end of the day it is only love, sacrifice and devotion that changes hearts, which is made possible by the grace Christ gives us to lead a virtuous, faithful life in him.

Conclusion

St. Agnes was put to death when a sword pierced her throat; the only way for us to pierce the hard heart of the culture of death is with the double-edged sword of purity and courage. That is why we must live always in communion with Christ, living out the faith we have received from the time of the apostles.

He is the pure Lamb who takes away the sins of the world – a lamb, because, in the Bible, the lamb is also the animal of sacrifice. Let us, then, live always in communion with him and in conformity to his will, for he makes it possible for us to offer in return a pure and pleasing sacrifice of our whole lives – for the sanctity of life in this world, and forever in his Kingdom that is to come.