

Agnes, Martyr at Rome, 304: Mass

January 21, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Song of Solomon 2:10–13; Psalm 116:1–8; Matthew 18:1–6

My second edition copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian* begins the entry on Saint Agnes with these words, “She has been venerated as a virgin in Rome since the 4th cent., but the early legends of her martyrdom vary considerably, and nothing certain can be deduced as to the date or manner of her death.”¹ By contrast, the authorized biographical sketch for her commemoration in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* begins, “As a child of twelve years, Agnes suffered for her faith, in Rome, during the cruel persecution of the Emperor Diocletian.”² I think the point, as it were, goes to the *Oxford Dictionary*.

An entry in Wikipedia tells us that Emperor Constantine the Great built a mausoleum outside the city for his daughter Constanza. It still stands. A Christian basilica was built by her mausoleum in the fourth century.³ In the Mediterranean world, graveyards were outside the city; the dead were handled by tanners who lived outside the city. But handled the bodies of their beloved dead. For them, graveyards were a place of prayer.⁴ The tombs of martyrs were resting places of the mortal remains of the living. Honorius I, bishop of Rome from 625 until he died in 638, built a new church on the ruins of the basilica.⁵

A slight digression. Michael Walsh, in his book *The Conclave: A Sometimes Secret and Occasionally Bloody History of Papal Elections*, notes that from the third century, bishops east and west were called papa.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Agnes, St.,” 25.

² *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 138.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sant%27Agnese_fuori_le_mura, (accessed 21 January 2021).

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4–8.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sant'Agnese_fuori_le_mura, (accessed 21 January 2021).

In the eighth century, the title began to be used in documents. It was Gregory VII, bishop of Rome from 715 until he died in 731, who “demanded that in the West the term should be applied only to the bishops of Rome, and to no one else.”⁶

It’s not intellectually honest in our time to use a title whose meaning in the centuries after Gregory VII changes radically. It’s also worth noting that my copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* has no entry for the papacy. Still, there is an entry for “Rome (Early Christian),” Unfortunately, it is not careful with the use of the title.⁷ It’s clear from the New Testament that Paul of Tarsus never thought of Peter of Capernaum as being in charge.⁸

No subject is more difficult for me than cruelty to people and other living, breathing creatures. What philosophers call the problem of evil is a problem for me.⁹ I can’t remember when I first realized that movies shot in black and white enabled me to distance what I saw and my internal emotional response. I do remember in the movie *Schindler’s List* that, when a young girl in a pink dress appears on an otherwise black and white screen—and then, at the end, when the actors and survivors appear at Schindler’s grave. I could not control my emotions. I haven’t wanted to see the movie again. I try not to dwell on the cruelty going on in our day in this world.

For what it’s worth, I have a firm conviction as an Anglican that Christians should read the whole Bible in a good translation. Now I cringe whenever we say Psalm 137 comes up in Daily Evening Prayer. It begins beautifully, “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion.” It ends with these words, “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction . . . Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes

⁶ Michael Walsh, *The Conclave: A Sometimes Secret and Occasionally Bloody History of Papal Elections* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 2.

⁷ ODCC, s.v. Rome (Early Christian), 1198–99.

⁸ Galatians 2:11.

⁹ Hick, John, “The Problem of Evil,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan Publishing & the Free Press, 1967), 136–141.

them against the rock.”¹⁰ The only answer I carry in my heart is faith in the purposes of God.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ Psalm 137:7–9. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 792.