

St Agnes 21st January

Agnes was a young girl – perhaps 12 or 13 -martyred in the wave of persecutions of Christians in the second half of the 3rd c. The “Account of the Martyrs” written before 350 tells us that her “Birth Day” – that is, the day on which she died and entered Heaven, was 21st January, and that she was buried in the Catacomb which now bears her name. A poem by Pope Damasus (366-384) has been discovered which confirms this. Her martyrdom was brought about by her refusal to marry; her rejected suitors denounced her as a Christian – marriage was an important economic and political transaction for wealthy Roman families, and Christian teachings of the period were denounced for disrupting this system.

The Emperor Constantine ordered a church dedicated to her built over part of this catacomb. This evolved into the current church of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls (*Sant'Agnese fuori le mura*) a complex built and decorated over many centuries down to the present day, brilliantly explored by Margaret Visser in *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (2001).

Her name in Greek means “Chaste”, fitting with her being honoured as a virgin. It resembles the Latin for “lamb” (Agnus, as in Agnus Dei “Lamb of God”) and so she is always shown with a lamb in art.

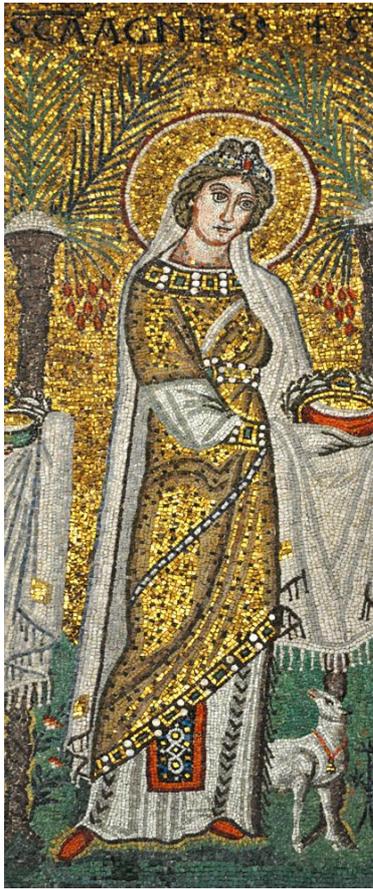
Marina Warner writes

“The Pope’s pallium, a long white band worn over the pope's shoulders, is woven from the first shearings of lambs that have been blessed on January 21, at the church, where the saint is buried; the lambs are then raised in the papal summer palace of Castel Gandolfo until their wool is ready, at which point Benedictine nuns in a convent in Trastevere work it into the papal vestment. I chanced upon the ceremony several years ago, and saw two of the new year's lambs, garlanded with white and red roses, trot up a scarlet carpet (symbolizing martyrdom) to the altar where the priest, in full fig, awaited them. I almost expected the little creatures to kneel down.

The pope then distributes more examples of the nuns' handiwork from the same holy wool to new archbishops, until, through a fanciful pun on the saint's name ... the whole archiepiscopate of the Catholic world has been wound into the posterity of a 12- or 13-year-old girl who died nearly 2,000 years ago.”

Here is Pope Francis performing the blessing in 2016





As one of the nine saints named in the Roman Canon (the saints specifically named in the Eucharist Liturgy) Agnes came to represent young female martyrs generally, and so she is frequently included in groups of saints – left, in Sant' Apollinare in Ravenna (6th c) and below, in Jan Van Eyck's Ghent Altar (1432) where Agnes can be seen, with the lamb, on the extreme left in the first row. The palms carried by the saints are also a typical attribute of martyrs.



It is only in the 16th c that Agnes begins to be represented as a single figure in painting and sculpture, stimulated by the (re) discovery of her remains in a crypt beneath the church in Rome. The small bronze model, now in Canberra, is by Bernini c 1660, and the painting by Domenichino c 1620



St Vincent 22nd January

A Google search for St (or Saint) Vincent will produce an abundant list for the current musician (St) or the Caribbean island (Saint) but nothing on the martyr whose commemoration extended "wherever the name of Christ was known.", wrote St Augustine in a sermon.

Vincent, referred to as "of Saragossa" (in Spain) to distinguish him from later saints of the same name was the first martyr from Spain, probably around the same time as St Agnes (c 300). Although very little is known of him, it is certain that he was tortured to death after refusing to sacrifice to the Emperor and the gods. He was a deacon associated with bishop Valerius, acting as his spokesman, since the Bishop had a speech impediment. In Prudentius' poem in praise of martyrs "Crowns of Martyrdom" (c 400) his martyrdom is joyfully hailed; the popularity of this poem through the Middle Ages, and the widespread distribution of relics believed to be those of Vincent throughout Europe helped to keep his memory as one who had suffered for the faith alive, and even today 22nd January is a public holiday in Valencia. The island was so named because Columbus first sighted it on 22nd January 1492.



This panel from an altarpiece for the Cathedral of Zaragoza (Saragossa) by Tomás Giner, (1462–1466), now in the Prado Museum, represents the saint with items associated with his martyrdom – the rope around his neck attached to the stone with which his body was thrown into the sea, and the X shaped cross. He is dressed in the elaborate robe of the diaconate in the 15th c, and, anachronistically, trampling on a Moor, emphasizing his standing as a “defender” of Valencia. The donor of the altarpiece kneels at one side.