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LIFE OF ST. AGNES

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LIFE OF ST. AGNES

Virgin and Martyr

BY

DOM A. SMITH, C.R.L.

Permissu Superiorum

4753

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In cujus fidem, etc.

Romæ, ex Ædibus Generalitiis ad S. Petrum ad Vincula, die 5 Martii, anni 1906.

J. B. STROZZI,
Abbas Generalis.

L. ✠ S.

AUG. MARLANGEON, C.R.L.,
Secretarius.

Nihil obstat.

GILBERTUS HIGGINS, C.R.L.,
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Imprimi potest.

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Westmonasterii,
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PREFACE

THE San Francisco and Valparaiso earthquakes have not been wholly unproductive of good. They have given occasion for the display of noble qualities of which pessimists would make us believe poor human nature is incapable. They also prove the wonderful resilient properties possessed by the younger races of the world. Out of their ruins these American cities will rise still more beautiful and prosperous.

The same catastrophes have served another purpose: they have severely tested our boasted civilization, and exposed its weak points. What passed for solid marble has, in many instances, turned out to be only brick or concrete with a thin facing of a more precious material.

There is nothing like a visitation of this nature for the detection of veneer and sham in man's composition. Human nature is ineradicably infected with a strain of savagery to which it is ever insensibly harking back. Under ordinary circumstances this inherent characteristic is latent, and escapes detection. But let a calamity occur that transcends the limits of every-day experience, and the ugly flaw leaps to the front and humiliates us.

At the first opportunity the lawless and desperate

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elements of society break away from the restraints of civilized life; every shred of decency is cast off by the dregs of the community, and not only by these, but even by the so-called better classes. The looting of the Chinese shops in San Francisco proved how demoralized even your middle classes can become in circumstances favourable to obtaining at a stroke by unlawful but safe means the money or money's value, upon the acquisition of which their whole mind is habitually bent. San Francisco taught the world a much-needed lesson when it let the worshippers of 'respectability' see their representatives and favourites marching in the ranks of the looters, and exulting in the convenient disruption of the ordinary bonds of society.

Whilst we lament the widespread misery caused by these awful disasters, we are obliged sorrowfully to admit that nothing better could have happened to take the conceit out of those who think that mere material progress is sufficient to humanize the world, and that moral continence can be enforced by purely secular education. Only an earthquake can awaken minds that sleep in presence of the sharp lessons taught by Japanese excesses in Corea and the alarming increase of child criminals in France.

The book which we have been asked to introduce to the reading public deals with the upheavals of an older world than that discovered by Columbus. The 'Life of St. Agnes' uses the lessons of an earlier generation in order to deepen and harden the character of our moral continence.

The author, a member of an Order which has

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always held the Roman martyr in affectionate esteem, desires to spread the knowledge and cult of St. Agnes throughout every English-speaking land. In making this attempt, Prior Smith is evidently animated not only by motives of devotion to a saint near whose relics he was fortunate enough to make his philosophical and theological studies, but also by a wish to help on, as a priest and a citizen, what should engage the best attention and efforts of every Christian: the welfare of society, and the march of true civilization. These two motives should be kept in sight by the reader of this work if its true value is to be appreciated.

Like most of our best thinkers, the latest of St. Agnes's biographers seems to have arrived at the conclusion that civilization to be durable must rest on the four pillars of Christian ethics — prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Progress, if it is to be worthy of the name—moral, human progress — cannot move along the line of least resistance. It must face opposition of the most violent kind. It will have to stand the shock of sensual temptation, and to resist the erosion caused by the ever-encroaching waves of infidel thought. The morality that is to subsist through this ordeal must be, according to this author, of the true Christian type, and sustained by definite and authoritative Christian teaching and practice.

This view of human progress is one eminently deserving of serious consideration at a time when Education and Labour cranks are threatening to join hands with Continental Socialism, and to withdraw

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the school and the workshop from the sphere of Christian ethics. Blind guides, they fail to perceive that morality is not a foundation in itself, but a roof upheld over society by the Divine sanction of revealed religion.

The 'sweet reasonableness' of moral continence, the 'power to do without' conferred by Christianity, is here taught by Prior Smith not in the form of dry precepts or brain-tiring lectures, but under the attractive guise of an interesting and well-connected story. To those whom the sublime figure of the Man-God, fount and model of the highest civilization, might discourage is presented the portrait of an innocent and winning child who smiles away their fears, and gleefully provokes them to a noble and holy rivalry. Running before them towards the Christian's goal, this tender maiden appears to look back and say to her companions in the race what St. Paul said to the hesitating Corinthians, 'Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ.'

It may be objected by lovers of novelties, and readers who hanker after the latest scrap of news, that a book treating of times and persons and occurrences of so ancient a date must be dull and unarresting. To pass such a judgment on this 'Life of St. Agnes' would show little acquaintance with the facts of the case or with history. Although so many centuries separate us from the Catholic contemporaries of the child-martyr, St. Agnes's example will be found helpful, and her biography replete with interest.

We should be labouring under a huge mistake if

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we imagined the world had radically altered since the days of the Roman persecutions, or that the conditions of Christian warfare were essentially different. Fashion passes, but the world remains ever the same.

An apposite instance of this eternal unchangeableness was brought by a French exile under our notice the other day. Speaking of the village where his religious life was violently cut short by the apostles of 'liberty, fraternity, and equality,' this worthy priest said that the same names are to be seen on the same sides to-day as during the Revolution. The great-grandchildren of those who in 1789 profaned the church and pillaged the castle are now the enemies of religion and of justice. The great-grandchildren of those who worshipped God in secret, harboured the priest, and saved some of the property of innocent landlords, are to-day defending their churches and storing away for their legitimate owners, the monks and nuns, such goods as they could save from the hands of these chartered brigands, the liquidators. Human nature is a constant and invariable quantity. St. Agnes may have lived her short life when the world was younger. The same world is strong and lusty to-day. It meets us on every side. We live and move and grow in a worldly atmosphere. The same three-headed monster which the martyrs of the three first centuries had to face, obstructs the path to heaven in the twentieth century. Pride, sensuality, and greed stand in arms against the kingdom of Christ and of God. 'The days are evil.' The age is a pagan one. Catholics are living to-day in full heathenism.

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Civilized States are commonly designated Christian. The appellation is in most cases as incorrect and misleading as when applied to the sects that have separated from the one Church built by Christ. No serious and reflecting mind can fail to note the growth and expansion of pagan principles in the government of the modern world. The deification of the State has come back. The worship of this god is being revived everywhere in Europe. The high-priests of this Erastian cult are ready and proud to discharge their self-assumed functions. The souls of children and the rights of parents are being sacrificed by militant sectaries to the national Moloch, the cries of the victims being drowned in the crash of tinkling cymbals, brazen throats, and the 'drum ecclesiastick.' This recrudescence of an ancient worship does not receive from Catholics the attention its dangerous character deserves. Neither is this to be wondered at, seeing that our co-religionists in too many instances receive all their information about contemporary events—social, political, and religious—from Protestant, Jewish, or infidel newspapers. These are wont, partly from lack of fixed principles and partly with set purpose, to gloss over the hideousness of this cruel and deadly cult. A few words, therefore, on State worship as it existed in pagan Rome will not be out of place. They will help the reader to grasp more easily the perils of England's position to-day, and will supplement the author's pertinent but necessarily brief observations on the causes of the persecution which brought the life of St. Agnes to so early a termination.

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Christianity was absolutely incompatible with the heathen Roman State. 'I came not to send peace, but the sword' (Matt. x. 34). All human affairs, according to a great American scholar, were pervaded with the spirit of paganism. 'Its symbols were everywhere; it had twined itself so closely round ancient life and manners that they had grown together. It watched over the child's first cry, taught it to speak, to eat, to drink. . . . Its influence was as potent in public matters as in the affairs of private and family life. The Emperor was the supreme Pontiff; the magistrates were priests; the worship of the State gods was the touchstone of loyalty' ('The Valerian Persecution,' by Rev. P. J. Healy, D.D.).

To all this Christianity was utterly foreign. The State creed had become a part of the life of the people. The acceptance of the new creed implied a complete transformation of the old order and a profound upheaval of existing conditions. The Gospel struck at the very existence of the popular religion, and sapped the foundations of political and social life built on and dove-tailed into that religion. Christianity and heathendom were thus too widely divergent in essentials to allow of any compromise. Toleration was equally impossible between claims fundamentally incompatible. 'The hostility,' continues Dr. Healy, 'was of such a nature that it would never cease until such time as Christianity had triumphed over the established order, or had itself been annihilated.'

These illuminating words of the American priest are corroborated in Henry W. Wilberforce's magnificent contribution to Catholic literature, 'The Church

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and the Empires.' The learned author, following the Comte de Champagny, shows how the essence of modern paganism, or the worship of the State, consists in the adoption of two principles upon which Roman antiquity founded its whole social system.

These principles are, first, that the duty of man to the community of which he is a member, and especially towards the nation, is superior to all other duties. Next (which is the converse of the first), that the society to which a man belongs has an absolute right over him.

'The Christian religion lays down exactly the opposite. The great duty, the real foundation of the social order, is not the love of an abstraction which is called our country, but the love of a real being called our neighbour. Patriotism is not condemned, but it is transformed by Christianity. It is one of the shades of this love (of our neighbour). Christian patriotism is nothing more than a special love for certain men, in close relations with whom it has pleased God we should dwell—a law holy and venerable, but still a secondary law, a mere fragment of a superior law which includes it. The country, in fact, under the Christian law is no longer an abstract, mysterious being, something superior to man and approaching Divinity; it is simply an aggregate of men, and as such subject to all the same obligations with the human being himself, to all the rules of justice and charity towards all men, whether citizens or foreigners, friends or enemies.

'Modern paganism, in direct opposition to Christian faith, has moulded its politics like those of ancient

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paganism. The city it has made its temple. It once more deifies the public interests. Of the fiction called one's country it has made its god' ('The Church and the Empires,' pp. 88, 89).

The Church crisis in France and the school crisis in England show us the peculiar interest which the history of the Romans under the Empire should have for those living in our day. And when we consider the ruthlessness of the persecution which the French and English politicians of the un-Christianizing school are with an *entente cordiale* waging against a body so considerable as the Christian Church of to-day, we may well ask in amazement, How could the 'little flock' of Christ in the first three centuries ever stand the shock of the Roman Colossus? The same question presented itself to the mind of the erudite author of the 'Cæsars of the Third Century.'

'What force was it,' asks de Champagny, 'that resisted the force thus exerted against Christianity? Here was no league of Smalcalde, no conspiracy of Amboise, no "oath of the tennis-court" (June 20, 1789), no one of the ordinary circumstances of a revolution. Those who were proscribed concealed themselves or fled; those who were arrested suffered death without resistance. . . . At last this war, in which the one party only inflicted death and never suffered it, while the other only suffered and never inflicted it, ended in the triumph of that party which died over that which slew. The sword fell shivering against breasts which offered themselves to it.

'And this event stands by itself in the history of the world. This universal resignation, this courage so

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heroically, so constantly passive, and still more, this triumph, won only by dying, has no single parallel in history.

'No sect, no religion, has ever encountered the sword with the absolute passiveness which was the characteristic of the primitive Christians, or if there has been anyone which ever practised it, that one has been crushed. Christianity alone, so far as I can learn, has ever submitted itself in this manner; Christianity alone, most unquestionably, has ever gained such a victory by so submitting itself' (*ibid.*, p. 109).

To the monument built up of Christian meekness and passiveness St. Agnes contributed 'all she had,' even the sands of her young life. The story of her training for this supreme act of generosity is told with an amplitude and a wealth of detail for which some readers may not be prepared. Had, however, the Saint's latest biographer chosen to avail himself of all the material at his hand, this volume might have been a much larger one. He has wisely confined himself to what the best students of that early epoch have sifted from the legendary lore which has gathered around the name of Rome's favourite martyr. Where documentary evidence appeared weak, and he has had to rely on traditions, however venerable, the author states the fact unhesitatingly, and leaves the reader free to form his own opinions.

The picture of ancient Rome, pagan and Christian, whilst accurately drawn, does not contain a single detail that could bring a blush to the cheek of the youngest reader. It makes an effective background

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to the beautiful figure of St. Agnes. Here we have depicted the very stage on which

> 'That maiden most serene
> Was walking with a quiet mien'

when Death, in the person of Procus, came to woo her. Here, amid the palaces of the Roman nobility and the squalid tenements of their starving brethren, this tender plant struck root in Christian soil. Here it grew and flowered, sweetening the air with its fragrance, and gladdening the eye with its exceeding loveliness. Here at a Christian mother's knee the soldier and bride of Jesus received, piece by piece, the armour of God, according as her tender years and gradually awakening faculties gave her strength to bear it. How fair this maiden-warrior must have appeared to the angels, and how terrible to Satan, when she stood accoutred for battle, her loins girt about with truth, and wearing the breastplate of faith and charity, having on her head the helmet of salvation, and in her right hand the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God! The lines of Shelley naturally come to our mind:

> 'A mist, a light, an image rose,
> Small at first, and weak and frail,
> Like the vapour of the vale.
>
> 'It grew—a shape arrayed in mail,
> Brighter than the viper's scale,
> And upborne by wings whose grain
> Was as the light of sunny rain.
>
> 'With step as soft as wind it passed.
> * * * * *

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'As flowers beneath the footsteps waken,
As stars from Night's loose hair are shaken,
As waves arise when loud winds call,
Thoughts sprang where'er that step did fall.'

The book is one which may be recommended to all classes. Mothers, the first and most effective educators, will learn from its pages the importance of home-training; the clergy will find it useful when endeavouring to revive the old devotion that the women of England used to exhibit towards St. Agnes before the Reformation. Our nuns will appreciate its influence on the fresh, young, and generous hearts which they are training for the Christian warfare. But the 'Life of St. Agnes' appeals more particularly to her clients and to the Children of Mary, to whose keeping the relics of this heroic maiden were in a sense confided by Pope Pius IX., when, in 1870, His Holiness made the Church of St. Agnes, outside the walls of Rome, the central shrine of the Arch-Sodality. It is the very book for those whose hearts should be 'aflame with love, but steeled with chastity.'

It is to be hoped that the author will find time to enrich English hagiology with another volume breathing, like the present one, the inspiring and invigorating perfumes of Rome.

GILBERT HIGGINS, C.R.L.

St. Peter-in-Chains,
London, N.
Feast of St. Matthew, 1906.

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LIFE OF ST. AGNES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

'Cujus prius spiritali
Nunc ipsius corporali
Fruimur præsentia.'

'(Agnes) whom before in spirit
We possessed, we now inherit,
In corporeal presence too.'

ADAM OF ST. VICTOR.

Discovery of reliquary of St. Agnes—Sources of material for the life of the Saint—Inscription of St. Damasus—Writings of St. Ambrose—Prudentius—Acts—Reliability of these documents.

SANT' AGNESE FUORI LE MURA was in a ferment of excitement on the afternoon of Monday, November 25, 1901. News had reached the abbey that an important discovery might be made at any moment in the adjoining basilica. For many years the inmates of St. Agnes's Abbey had desired to ascertain the exact spot where the relics of their beloved patroness had

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been deposited. But two revolutions, the French and the Italian, had utterly ruined the religious, and put it out of their power to undertake the necessary excavations.

Catholic Germany came to the aid of the Roman Canons Regular. Cardinal Kopp, Prince-Bishop of Breslau, was created in 1893 a cardinal priest of the title of St. Agnes on the Nomentan Way. From the day when his Eminence took possession of his titular Church he graciously evinced a friendly and lively interest in the Order to which its clergy belong. Thanks to the Cardinal's generosity, the Canons were enabled to gratify their pious curiosity in respect to the Roman martyr's resting-place.

Excavations were begun in October, 1901. The sanctuary of the ancient and beautiful basilica was selected for the field of operations, which were superintended by Monsignor Wilpert and Dom Augustus Bacci, C.R.L. The pavement behind the high altar covering, what is known as the *retro sanctos,* or vicinity of the saints, was broken through, and a long and careful search was made, with interesting results. At a depth of nearly 5 feet a gallery was discovered running parallel with the altar, containing arcosolia and intact graves of Christians who had been buried as close as possible to the virgin martyr's remains. Coins were found of the fourth and fifth centuries, and inscriptions of a great historical and archæological value were brought to light.

In one tomb reposes a maiden with the same name as the saint :

IIII NONAS IV [NIAS] IN PACE ABIIT HAGNE.

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Another grave is inscribed to

MARCELLINE . BENEMERENTI . IN . PACE. DEP[OSITÆ] . PRI[DIE] .
NONAS MAIAS LIMENIO CATVLINO . I .

By adding 'Consulibus' to this inscription we find the tomb was constructed A.D. 349.

These and similar finds brought much satisfaction to the Canons Regular, but the one object upon which their hearts were set remained concealed until the last Monday in November. That day was fated to be a red-letter one in the chronicles of the Nomentan monastery. Early in the forenoon rumours ran through the cloister that the workmen had come upon a vaulted chamber which was in the very position where one would naturally expect to find the relics of St. Agnes. The Right Rev. Dom Luigi Santini, Abbot-General of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, was quickly on the spot. His feelings and those of his brethren may be easily imagined. It was known that Paul V. had translated the sacred remains in 1615, and enclosed them with those of St. Emerentiana in a silver urn which cost £800. From that time the gift of the Borghese Pope had never been seen by mortal eye. In a few instants what three centuries had kept in darkness was brought to light. Trembling with awe and gladness, the religious were gazing upon the very shrine of St. Agnes. The silver urn enclosing her ashes stood before them, in no way injured by being buried so long in the earth.

The urn is about 4½ feet in length, 1½ in width, and 1 foot in height. It is in the form of a sarcophagus, and lies in a kind of cell of masonwork, lined

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with wood. On the lid or cover of the urn are the words:

PAVLVS . V . P[ONT] . MAX.

VT . SS. AGNETIS . ET . EMERENTIANÆ . CORPORA.

HONORIFICENTIUS . CONDERENTVR.

ARCAM . HANC . ARGENTEAM . FIERI . IVSSIT.

INEAQ . SACRAS . RELIQVIAS . COLLOCAVIT . MDCXV . PON . XI.

Translation.

'Paul, V.P.M., that the bodies of SS. Agnes and Emerentiana might be interred with greater honour, commanded this silver shrine to be made, and in it placed the sacred relics, A.D. 1615, the eleventh year of his pontificate.'

The front and back are adorned with the Papal arms, and contain the dedication inscriptions:

S. EMERENTIANÆ.	S. AGNETI.
VIRG . ET . MART.	VIRG . ET . MART.

In the spaces at the ends are movable handles for lifting the shrine. Running around the urn is a sort of narrow cornice or scroll composed of the winged griffin and eagle, the armorial bearings of the Borghese family. The cover has a crown of two crossed palms. All the decorations and inscriptions are in high gilt relief.

When the Canons had satisfied their devotion and rendered thanks to our most Holy Saviour and to St. Agnes for the privilege that had been granted them, measurements and photographs were taken of the shrine, and the chamber was closed up again.

* * * * *

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The subsequent chapters purport to depict the life and times of St. Agnes. A saint who in this twentieth century has, one may say, come back from the grave will surely have some message to deliver. A world rolling in a delirium of lust over the precipice of irreligion might be rescued if only it could be brought face to face with the awful purity and heroic faith of the Roman child-martyr.

'Sublimest virtues
E'en in their dust remain:
Whence from beneath the altar
They yet exert their might,
Subduing death and sickness
And putting hell to flight.'

No attempt has been made to do more than to give in English the generally received history of the saint. History in the strict sense of the word it cannot be called. There are no contemporary biographies, and the sources from which we gather anything at all, though abundant, are so much at variance, and in many cases are so palpably exaggerated, that the perusal of them tends often to create doubt rather than to inform. Some learned modern students have given these documents their attention, and subjected them to severe criticism. As a result, they have been cast aside as worthless and unreliable by several authorities of note. Others have taken into account that, whilst it must be regarded as hopeless to separate the sure from the doubtful and false, there is a probability of truth running through the texture of legends, such as that of St. Agnes, which claims respect, particularly when supported by early traditional

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beliefs. The present writer has not attempted to define the critical value of the sources of the history of St. Agnes;[1] but it may be well to mention the documents upon which the following Life is based.

1. The inscription of St. Damasus (see Chap. XVII.).

Damasus sat in the chair of St. Peter from 366 to 384, and is well known for the piety and care which he evinced towards the tombs of the martyrs. Many of their shrines he restored or adorned, but his great work was the embellishing of them with inscriptions, which usually contained some biographical notice of the saints, and, being cut in marble, were destined to stand as long-lasting memorials and monuments. The large marble slab which the Pontiff caused to be placed at the sepulchre of St. Agnes is now to be seen on the right wall of the flight of steps leading to her basilica. In the course of time it became detached from its original position, and for many years was lost. In 1728 it was on the point of being destroyed altogether, and was rescued from beneath the pick of a workman, who was about to break it up for building purposes. This inscription of Damasus, *Fama refert*, is particularly valuable as being a concise epitome of the whole story of St. Agnes, composed only a short period after the death of the saint.

2. St. Ambrose, too, has given the history of St. Agnes. It is contained in a treatise which the holy Bishop of Milan addressed to his sister, St. Marcellina; and this would have been composed towards the end of the fourth century.

[1] A full critical account may be seen in L. de Kerval's 'Ste. Agnes.'

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To the same Holy Doctor is attributed a Latin hymn in praise of our Saint. The first stanza runs as follows :

'Agnes beatæ Virginis
Natalis est quo spiritum
Cœlo refudit debitum
Pio sacrata sanguine.'

'Agnes the blessed maiden,
On this her natal day,
With martyr's merit laden,
Did speed to heaven away.'

As this hymn introduces several new features and episodes which are not to be found in the above-mentioned treatise of the Holy Doctor of Milan, its authorship seems doubtful. Probably it should be attributed to an imitator of the style of St. Ambrose, whose expressions are constantly to be met with in the verses.[1]

3. Perhaps the most beautiful of all writings on St. Agnes is the hymn contained in the 'Peri Stephanon' of Marcus Aurelius Prudentius. Most remarkable amongst Christian poets and of the fourth century, Prudentius has set in classic Latin verse the whole story of the Saint. And certainly the story was one well worthy of poetic treatment. It was thought that the facts sung by Prudentius were gathered by him from traditions still living in the Eternal City. Some modern critics, however, have suggested that the poet's imagination is responsible for the first production of much of the colouring in this martyrdom. This may be true, but it seems

[1] Pio Franchi, 'S. Agnese nella tradizione e nella leggenda,' chap. i., pp. 5 and 8.

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hardly to have been proved, and, in spite of such suggestions, the immortal work of the great poet makes us feel a greater admiration and more tender veneration towards the martyr-maiden.

4. We find the most detailed account of St. Agnes, her life, surroundings, passion, and martyrdom, in the 'Acts.' The acts of the martyrs of the early Church have all been subjected to the most careful examination by many eminent students in order that false and even heretical statements might be traced to their real source. Such careful revision has shown that few, if any, of the Roman martyrs have their memory recorded in genuine acts—that is, official documents drawn out by legal authorities of the time or by ocular witnesses.

This is true also of the 'Acts' of St. Agnes. They are of considerably later compilation, and contain internal evidence of having been elaborated and amplified by one who was not conforming himself to the strict lines of history. The compiler of the Latin 'Acts' declares that he is recounting that which he has found written in various places, and which he would collect and preserve from oblivion.[1]

The Roman archæologists, Mariano Armellini and Orazio Marucchi, both think that this is precisely what the 'Acts' themselves show. The latter says: 'Although the "Acts" are not authentic, they contain a number of historical traits. The author must have had before him documentary materials of a much

[1] 'Haec ego Ambrosius servus Christi dum in voluminibus abditis invenerim scripta, non sum passus infructuoso silentio tegi' 'Acts.'

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earlier date. In effect, we find in them many evident traces of antiquity'[1] ('Elem. d'Archéol,' vol. ii., p. 258).

To consider in detail the arguments for and against credibility in the 'Acts' would require too great a space and would be outside the scope of the present work. We must admit that no available document concerning St. Agnes dates back earlier than the middle of the fourth century, and scarcely reaches even that. And the development of these writings took place only in the fifth century. We have, then, no contemporary record. On the other hand, we have ample evidence that pure legend has gradually grown around the Saint's history. But because of these accretions is the whole history to be set aside as pure romance? The answer of P. de Kerval seems a reasonable one: 'We believe that in the legend of St. Agnes, in spite of all deformities, in spite of embellishments, in spite of gradual amplifications, beneath a covering that is imaginary and romantic, we may suppose, without rashness or absurdity, that the youth of the Saint, her firmness in presence of the judge and executioners, her being exposed in the place of infamy, her condemnation to be burnt, perhaps the consummation of her martyrdom by the sword, were

[1] Signor Marucchi has not overlooked the critique of P. Pio Franchi. He says in a footnote: 'M. Pio Franchi de Cavalieri vient de publier une étude sur ces Actes ("S. Agnese nella tradizione e nella leggenda," Roma, 1899). 'Sa critique est très fine, mais peut-être un peu sevère; il semble bien que les actes aient une valeur historique plus grande que celle qu'il leur accorde' (*loc. cit*).

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historical realities. If these events have not that moral certitude which only contemporary witnesses or documents could produce, still, there seems to be no serious motive for rejecting them altogether.'[1]

[1] 'Ste. Agnès,' Appendix, p. 379.

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CHAPTER II

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

'Ye are the salt of the earth.'

Surroundings in which the first Christians lived—Growth of Christianity — 'Discipline of the secret' — Accusation s against the faithful.

To realize the exquisite beauty of a flower one must see it growing on Nature's breast. In the same way, to form anything like a true conception of St. Agnes's loveliness of soul, one must put her back in her own times, surroundings, and atmosphere.

She lived in an age which presents drama after drama of unflagging interest. No one whose sympathies are with Christianity can look unmoved on the momentous struggle between the primitive Church and heathenism. It was a fight to the death, and well did the two antagonists know it. Cimmerian darkness, rising from the pool of brimstone and fire, called for the extinguishing of the Light of the world. Deep-seated error scented in the truth of the Gospel the presence of its unnatural foe. War dreaded the approach of Peace; Hate felt its throne shake as almighty Love, in the person of Jesus, stepped upon the earth; the idols, Greed, Sensuality, Injustice,

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trembled lest their worship should be disestablished and disendowed by Justice, Temperance, and Generosity.

That Christianity should have emerged in its sublime purity and simplicity from the very cesspool of the most pestilential paganism and grossest superstition is the strongest proof of the divinity of that religion. How could a Galilean fisherman win his way into such strongholds of idolatry as those of Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome? Who could have nerved the tent-maker of Tarsus to pit the folly of the Cross against the wisdom of Athens? What hope, humanly speaking, was there that 'the carpenter's Son' would pick up followers in the household of the Cæsars? Equally unlikely did it seem that the polluted soil of Imperial Rome could ever produce a flower like St. Agnes.

What actually occurred needs not to be told. A new day had begun to dawn when Pudens, the Senator, received the Prince of the Apostles into his house. Gradually the sky became lighter, but the Sun of Righteousness was almost hidden for three centuries behind a thick bank of cloud rising out of the sea of sin and error. Then the Labarum of Constantine waved over the last pagan Emperor, and the Chair of the Fisherman became the centre of a world vaster than that over which the Roman Eagle had fluttered.

When this change came Rome had been consecrated with the outpouring of the blood of saints, who, as willing sacrifices, had, in some measure, atoned for the depravity of their generation, and had invoked upon the Eternal City the special favour of God. It

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is of one of these noble victims that we propose to speak in the following pages.

The story of St. Agnes of Rome is the record of a *virgin* and *martyr*, dying in defence of faith and purity. This holy maiden's heroic constancy has earned for her the title of patroness of chaste and pure youth, and we have no doubt as to the reception which our simple recital of her virtues and trials will receive at the hands of the pious and the clean-minded.

In many respects human nature is ever the same, but in others the world was very different sixteen hundred years ago, when St. Agnes was living. It is easy to understand that a religion which invited men to lives of penance, virtue, and self-denial would hardly find favour in a society notorious at once for its luxury and for its insensibility to anything above the material. The divine force of Christianity carried the light and the consolations of the Gospel into the inmost recesses of Roman society, but did not at once dispel the darkness of ignorance and voluptuousness. Jupiter was worshipped in the Capitol, though Christ, too, was worshipped, if only in the hiding-places of the catacombs. Rome was still pagan, though the leaven of the true faith was working silently and rapidly among both slaves and patricians, amongst soldiers and civilians, and even at the very side of the unsuspecting Emperor (Phil. iv. 22).

The innate vigour and energy of the new religion had not yet obtained for it recognised standing amongst its enemies. The followers of Christ were regarded as dangerous to the State: they held aloof from the public games, from licentious festivals;

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they showed, by their example, that they condemned the excesses of luxury and of self-gratification which were in fashion amongst Roman citizens. To the Roman these brutal games and sinful feasts were part of Rome's glory and magnificence; sensual pleasures were the benefits which the noblest of the earth had earned for their city. So the Christian came to be viewed as a public enemy, and deserving the condemnation of all patriotic citizens.

Again, secrecy of faith and worship was a necessity if the most sacred doctrines and emblems were to be saved from constant irreverence. The law of the Church which imposed this concealment of teaching and liturgy is known as the *disciplina arcani* ('discipline of the secret')

As a result of this jealous care to shield the 'pearls' of holy religion from profanation, the faithful were accused of assembling in private to plot against the State, and to give themselves up to unnatural vices. The *Cœna*, or Lord's Supper, was declared to be a thyestian[1] banquet, at which the flesh and blood of infants were served as food and drink. Christians were accused of *adoring an ass*, and the ridicule which such a worship would deserve was heaped upon them.[2] Unfortunately, too, these crimes were falsely confessed by weak Christians under the application of torture.

[1] So named from Thyestis, who was supposed to have served up his own infant son as food to his brother Atreus.

[2] A blasphemous caricature has been found in excavations on the Palatine. It represents a crucified figure with the head of an ass and a Christian adoring before it. It is conjectured that this kind of drawing was indulged in as a pastime by the soldiers guarding the palace of the Palatine.

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So hateful to the populace had Christianity become, that to the impious novelty, was ascribed every calamity which happened. Plagues and famine, wars, earthquakes and storms were all manifestations of the wrath of Jove against the Christians. 'If,' says Tertullian ('Apolog.' chap. xl.), 'the Tiber overflows its banks, if the Nile does not overspread the crops, if the heaven is inactive, if the earth moves, if there be famine or pestilence—straightway (the cry is) the Christians to the lions.' The frenzy of hatred ran through every rank of society, until the State considered itself bound to step in and check the growth of Christianity in the supposed interest of the political and religious welfare of the commonwealth. At first it was thought that stern measures would crush the *superstitio exitiabilis* in a very short time. Such would undoubtedly have been the case had the first Christians been simply fanatics, and not upheld by more than natural strength. Facts, however, proved that the occasional outbreak of cruel persecution was futile. A well-organized system of repression was determined on, and the most severe enactments of the penal code became of every-day application.

In such a state of society we may imagine to what a degree of pressure and restraint the first Christians were subjected in their daily life. Not a sign might escape them that would betray their faith; every word had to be guarded on pain of forfeiting goods and life. Often enough it was their lot to stand by and hear their holy and beloved religion reviled and derided. Not even those occasional examples of justice which proceeded from Emperors or Governors

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were of any benefit to the persecuted; for accusations might be so presented as to demand punishment, or the judges might fear to offend the accusers. Thus, when Pliny the Younger, wearied with the numerous indictments of the Christians, wrote concerning the persecuted to the Emperor Trajan, the only reply he received was that he should refrain from seeking the Christians out, but if they were denounced he was not to let them off unless they abjured Christ and His doctrines. Even the most humane Emperors had to bow to the will of a mob maddened and thirsting for blood. Hadrian had issued decrees favourable to the Christians, yet it was at his bidding that St. Symphorosa was tortured and thrown into the river Anio, and her seven children broken on the wheel. Through three long centuries did the Church thus live and grow in that Babylon of the West[1] under circumstances the most adverse and hostile. Then pagan Rome gathered herself up for a final effort, and in the person of the Emperor Diocletian she refurbished every weapon, and brought into play every engine of destruction for the utter overthrow and extinction of Christianity.

[1] 1 Pet. v. 13: Though it has been disputed that St. Peter refers to Rome in this passage, a late writer says: 'All critics at present acknowledge that Babylon here should be understood of Rome' ('Le Christianisme et l'Empire Romain,' chap. i.).

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CHAPTER III

THE PATRICIAN'S DAUGHTER

'A lily amongst thorns.'

Uncertainty of the origin of the Saint—Her noble rank—The Patricians — Slaves — Ill-treatment of slaves — Love of pleasure amongst the Romans.

With the Apostle we hold that true Christians are 'children of God by faith in Christ Jesus' (Gal. iii. 26). We admit no exceptions, no inequalities. All the faithful alike, no matter what their race, status, or sex, stand on the same footing of sonship before God. There is a unity or solidarity in the Catholic Church, which is the body of Christ. What is true of one is true of all. The dignity of their adoption into the family of God surpasses every other dignity. This was well understood by some of those who moved in the highest circles of Roman society. Interrogated before their martyrdom, Christian ladies have been known to despise their worldly rank and glory only in the title of servants or handmaids of Jesus Christ.

If, then, we dwell at some length on the family and class to which Agnes belonged, it is simply to show more clearly the difficulties which she had to contend with and the glory of her victory.

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Writers generally are agreed that St. Agnes came of patrician stock, though the name of her family cannot be given with any degree of certainty. The most diligent researches have only resulted in conjectures more or less founded. The distinguished names of the Flavii, Calpurnii, Claudii and others have, it is true, been found in connection with that of Hagne or Agnes. In the excavations mentioned in our introductory chapter Mgr. Wilpert came upon another inscription bearing the name of 'Claudia.' This discovery, made in the very vicinity of St. Agnes's tomb, strengthens the opinion of those who, from the frequent recurrence of this name in her catacombs, maintain that the virgin-martyr belonged to the gens or family of the Claudii.

No doubt, however, exists that the blood of a long line of patricians flowed in the veins of St. Agnes, and the exquisite refinement of her mind, the distinction of her manners, and the nobility of her soul, abundantly prove the truth of the statement recently made by an eminent writer, that 'old Latin civilization was grand material for the grace of God to work on.'

Here a word about Roman society, and especially about the circle in which the parents of St. Agnes would move, will not be out of place.

The population of Rome had always been divided into two separate orders. There was a tradition that Romulus, the founder of the city, had selected a hundred men distinguished for merit, birth, and wealth as his first companions. These from their authority were called Fathers (Patres), and from their

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mature age were styled Elders, Seniors, or Senators. This chosen party formed the King's Council; all important affairs of state were submitted to their judgment, and through them all official appointments were made. The descendants of the Patres obtained the name of Patricians, a term which became equivalent to 'nobles.'

The patricians, as time went on, increased their power and influence. They succeeded in obtaining over the plebs, or people (commoners), an ascendancy which had not been contemplated in the first division of the community. To themselves they reserved the most honourable charges in the State, exclusive privileges and dignities. Their wealth kept pace with their honours, and enabled them to display a pomp and affluence which dazzled the eyes of the plebeians or commoners. This ostentatious form of life, and the sensual gratifications in which the patricians indulged without limit, made them dependent upon the services of slaves, who in crowds ministered to their every need or whim.*

The number of slaves in Rome defies calculation. In that immense and active human hive they formed an overwhelming majority. They were the workers; the patricians were the drones. Possessing no rights, protected by no laws, the slaves lived only for their imperious masters. To wait on, defend and amuse their aristocratic owners was the whole duty and

* A family with 4,000 or 5,000 slaves was considered middling rich. Some possessed as many as 20,000 (Athen, l. 6, chap. vii.), so that often the master knew not even a tenth part of his human property.

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purpose of a slave, who was supposed to have no feelings, and could at any time be subjected to any torture devised by a capricious employer.

For having broken a crystal vase, Vidius Pollio had a slave thrown into a fish-pond to be devoured by the monsters kept there as curiosities. If a master desired to watch the death-throes of a human being, he could order one of his slaves to be strangled, or stabbed, or otherwise executed. No one would have considered it cruel or unjust in a patrician to use a slave for the purpose of some experiment, say to test the strength of a newly-discovered poison.

This inhuman tyranny will appear less surprising if we remember that the head of a Roman household wielded absolute sway over all beneath him, so that wife and children, dependants and slaves, were all his property, and held their lives at his good pleasure. The wife, child, or slave, might be imprisoned, or flogged, or even put to death by the master, and the law sanctioned his decree. 'If ever the idea of absolute power without limit or control was realized, it was in the house of a rich Roman of the time of the Emperors' (M. Allard, 'Les Esclaves Chrétiens').

The depravity, immorality and effeminacy of the proud and arrogant patricians produced the most horrible excesses in the way of cruelty. Sometimes they overshot the mark. Laws were passed to regulate the punishments inflicted on poor slaves, but they gradually fell into complete desuetude. Seneca has some passages on this matter that make curious reading :*

* See *The Month*, August, 1876.

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'Men fly into a passion if the water is not properly heated, if a glass is broken, if a shoe is soiled . . . if a slave is not quick enough, if the drink he brings is not fresh, etc. If he speaks a little too loud, or looks cross, or mutters to himself words which we cannot quite hear, is that any reason why we should whip him and put him in chains? He lies bound before us, exposed without defence to our blows. . . . Why should we be in such haste to beat him and break his legs? Let us wait a little till the heat of our anger has cooled . . . by-and-by we shall be calmer and more fit to judge. . . . But no; we must needs visit at once with death, chains, prison, or starvation a fault which at the very most deserved but a light chastisement.'

Women were as inhuman as their husbands or fathers. The haughty patrician dame never hesitated to use her slaves as convenient objects upon which to wreak her spite. 'If the hair will not curl,' says Juvenal, 'the punishment [of the toilette slave] must be the whip.' And if the whip or cane were not within reach, the mistress would use her finger-nails to scratch, or needles to prick her victim. So degraded was the state of the Roman slave that Seneca did not hesitate to advise him to commit suicide in order to escape his servitude, and this extreme remedy was often resorted to by great numbers.

Accustomed to excessive opulence, the life of the Roman patrician was one of the grossest sensuality. The gluttony to which they were addicted is proverbial, and the stories extant challenge our credulity.

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Of Apicius, who lived under Tiberius, it is recorded that he squandered an immense fortune on the pleasures of banqueting, and from fear of having to retrench his table expenses he hanged himself.

Seneca describes a patrician at table thus :

'Harmonious songs sound in his ears, voluptuous spectacles present themselves to his eyes, the most delicate morsels attract his taste, his whole body is enveloped in the softest and smoothest clothing, and, that no pleasure may be excluded from any of his senses, the fragrance of varied perfumes reaches his nostrils. Such men care more for the ruffling of their hair than for the ruin of their country.'

No less depraved and insatiable were the patricians in their desire for amusements. The gladiatorial games formed the special delight of the Roman. These consisted of combats organized for the delectation of the public. Prisoners taken in war, slaves, or condemned criminals, were taken to the arena to fight for their lives, either against their fellow-men, or against wild beasts let loose upon them.

Thus was the life of these nobles, women as well as men, spent almost wholly in the pursuit of pleasure and luxury—a life divided between sleep, the luxurious bath, the toilet, dinners, and diversion.

But though these stars of ancient Roman life had fallen so low, the Gospel of Christ attracted not a few by its beauty and splendour. In fact, the very disgust of all so empty a life had doubtless prepared some to purchase the liberty wherewith 'Christ would make them free' (Gal. iv. 31).

By the third century some of Rome's most illus-

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trious families had embraced Christianity, preferring to rank themselves in the company of those who were under the constant menace of confiscation and death rather than eke out a life of sensuality, in which not the least pain and anxiety was to know how to devise some new food for the degraded passions.

This, then, was the foul soil out of which the loveliest flower of Roman maidenhood took its rise. According to the world's standard, no higher origin could be ambitioned. But whatever glory our heroine might have derived from her name being coupled with one of proud patrician rank, it must pale before the honour of having borne out in her life the true meaning of her own name of Agnes. In the one case it would have been the *éclat* of past acts of valour and merit in which she held no personal part; in the other the glory is her own. Her* blood came from her ancestors, her virtue from herself.

* 'Agnes latine Agnam significat: græce castam. Erat quod vocabatur, merito coronabatur.'

'Agnes in Latin means a "lamb," in Greek signifies "chaste." True to her name, she merited her crown' (St. Augustine, 'Serm.,' 273).

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CHAPTER IV

BIRTH AND INFANCY OF ST. AGNES

Various opinions regarding the time of the Saint's birth—The home of the Claudii—Description of Roman palace—Baptism of St. Agnes—Early education—Need of vigilance on the part of Christian parents in ancient Rome—Characteristics of St. Agnes from her office—She vows her virginity to Christ—Her zeal for the faith.

THERE is a diversity of opinion regarding the period at which the Saint lived, and much has been written on the subject. One theory is that she suffered under Valerian (A.D. 254 to 260). Another assigns the persecution of Diocletian (A.D. 303 to 311) as the time of her martyrdom. Quite recently Abbot Lolli, Canon Regular of the Lateran, has put forward arguments, based exclusively on a study of the catacombs of St. Agnes, to show that she was put to death in the first decade of the third century (see art., 'Figlia di Maria,' An. 37, No. 1, 1904). The present sketch follows the dates given by Baronius, Tillemont, Alban Butler, and Paul Allard. Nothing can be claimed as certain, but this period seems to the present writer to fall in with the general tenor of the 'Acts' and other documentary

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evidence, nor are there any cogent historical data against it.

According to the authorities upon whom we rely the subject of our sketch was born about A.D. 290, in the reign of the Emperor Diocletian. That would be just before the last and most terrible of the ten great persecutions which afflicted the early Church. Though, as we have already stated, we cannot determine positively the name of her family, there are reasons for supposing that she belonged to the patrician house of the Claudii. This is the conclusion arrived at by the distinguished archæologist, Signor Armellini, who, more than any other, has studied the catacombs where the body of the Saint was laid.*

According to tradition, the palace of the Claudii was situated in the very heart of Rome, where now stands the Capranica College. All the opulence and magnificence of the East would be called into requisition to adorn the patrician's town house.

From early Latin writers and from the discoveries made at Pompeii, we can easily picture to ourselves what St. Agnes's home looked like. The building was separated from the public street by the vestibule, a more or less spacious open courtyard. The main entrance was by a hall (called the *ostium*), in which there always sat on duty a slave, sometimes in chains, acting as the porter. A door from the hall led into an *atrium*, or inner hall, which was usually a

* 'Il Cimiterio di S. Agnese,' chap. ix. See also a paper contributed to the *Kleinere Mitheilungen*, 1902, by Dom A. Bacci, C.R.L.

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sumptuous reception-room. Here the wealth of Agnes' family was apparent. The floor of mosaic showed skilful designs of flowers, fruits, birds, or some historical or mythological subjects. Marble columns, handsomely polished, supported the roof; walls and ceilings were covered with the finest works of sculptors and painters.

Passing from the *atrium*, one would enter the *peristylium*, the open square which showed the interior of the quadrangular palace. Within this enclosure was a walk skirting the walls of the mansion, and covered in with a roof supported by pillars of various marbles. Within the palace, besides the ordinary dwelling-rooms, there were the vast banqueting-hall, the library, and the picture-gallery, all appointed with the luxury and splendour which the Roman then loved and thought necessary. Such would have been the palatial residence inherited by the parents of St. Agnes. When they became Christians we may well suppose that all unnecessary display and expenditure would have been laid aside, and the simplicity which befits a Christian's dwelling would have met the wondering eyes of their newly-born daughter.

The use of infant baptism in that age, though by no means universal, was yet common enough, especially among the more fervent and better instructed, to lead us to assume that Agnes received the benefit of this Sacrament at a very early age.* The Church was never in favour of a christening being deferred, having, as Origen affirms, received the *tradition* from the Apostles. St. Agnes herself, in the course of that

* St. Irenæus adv. Hær., l. 2; Origen, Com. in Ep. ad Rom.

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conflict which preceded her martyrdom, speaks of herself as 'consecrated to Christ from her very cradle.'* And she was later denounced as being a Christian from infancy.†

As was the almost invariable custom with Roman mothers, the parents of Agnes entrusted their infant to a nurse to be cared for until she reached the age when she might be given in marriage.

In all probability this nurse was a Greek slave of the household. The Greek women were especially in demand for this occupation, as they were usually of a tender and affectionate nature, frequently well educated and refined, and therefore thoroughly capable of instructing their charges, as well as being trustworthy in caring for their physical welfare.

It may sound strange to some acquainted only with modern ideas of slaves to refer to the learning, culture, or virtue of the Roman slave. But it must be borne in mind that, to captives dragged to Rome and held in slavery, the ancient mistress of the world owed much of her art and refinement. 'Sculptors, architects, painters, and even poets such as there were, came captive to Rome in gangs, were sold at auction as slaves, and became the property of the rich, to work all their lives at their several arts for their master's pleasure.'‡

* 'Corpus meum ab ipsis cunabulis Christo consecratum est.' —Ambros., 'Act. S. Agn.,' 10.

† 'Extitit quidam . . . qui diceret hanc Christianam esse ab infantia.' *Ibid.*, 4.

‡ 'Ave Roma Immortalis,' by F. Marion Crawford, vol. i., p. 60. The same writer goes on to say: 'The Roman made the solid and practical foundation, and then set the Greek to beautify it.'

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It is hard to picture to ourselves how the education of our Saint may have been conducted, seeing that at the early age at which she won the crown of martyrdom she was already so advanced in virtue and the knowledge of her religion. The greater part of her early instructions would have been received from the nurse. She would then be sent to the grammar school, attended by her maid. Let us remember that every Christian child who received any education at all passed through these schools, that the system was purely secular, and down to the fall of the Empire, long after the accession of Constantine, was administered by teachers who were very commonly pagan.* No doubt she would also attend those catechetical schools which the Church had even in those troublous times provided for Christian youth.† Some were conducted by the deaconesses who were appointed for the purpose of attending to the wants, material and spiritual, of females.

Studious and watchful indeed must have been the Christian parents of those days to preserve the virtue of their offspring, and to instil into their innocent minds the truths of the Gospel. The very atmosphere was thick with dangers. When sensuality was regarded as a necessary diversion, and vice in many forms was studiously cultivated, it was no easy task to train a young mind in the opposite direction. The streets of the corrupt old pagan city were one continual display of immorality. Venus, the goddess of impure love,

* 'The Church's Task under the Roman Empire,' by Charles Bigg, D.D., 1905, p. 25.

† *Cf.* School of Alexandria under Pantænus (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Augustine, 'Conf.,' Lib. V., chap. viii.).

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and Bacchus, the god of wine, were the personifications of the wild, rankling passions of untamed human nature; and men and women not merely professed to worship such deities, but even consecrated themselves to their service.

From some of the early apologists we learn that not a few of the Christians lost their fervour and virtue through contact with so unholy a life. 'We see some Christian ladies of high birth,' says Tertullian,* 'continue in the same pursuits as heretofore in order to bring out the beauty of their charms. They parade the same pomp as the pagan women, who lack all sentiment of true modesty.' He firmly condemns the excessive use of jewellery: 'These women have no remorse in treasuring in a small casket the worth of a considerable fortune. They string together (for their adornment) diamonds which represent a million sesterces . . . the income of a year hangs at the ear . . . and each finger of the left hand is adorned with that which has cost sacks of gold.'

In the same severe eloquence this writer reminds the Christian women that at any moment they may be called upon, not merely to renounce their vanities, but even their life to testify to their faith: 'I know not whether the wrists accustomed to rich bracelets may be brought to bear the weight and roughness of the chains, or the ankles that have been decorated with bands of gold will feel at ease when locked in the fetters. I fear that the head circled about with pearls and emeralds will not easily bend to the stroke of the sword.'

* 'De Cultu Feminarum.'

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The whole of this impassioned address points clearly to the fact that it was not uncommon for many to be drawn from a true Christian life into the fatal whirlpool of profanity. St. Agnes seems rather to have lived in the spirit of this further instruction of the same Christian writer: 'Appear,' he says, 'with ornaments and finery, but with such as the prophets and Apostles prescribe. Let your white vesture be that of simplicity, your purple that of chastity, beauty of features be that of modesty, and the charms of the mouth reserve of speech. Let virtue be your silks, holiness your fine linen, modesty your purple; thus clothed, you may court the love of God Himself.'

In spite of the many difficulties for Christian life in the ages of persecution, these principles became more deeply rooted in the bulk of the faithful than in our own day. Hardship is ever a strengthener of virtue, as the tree takes deeper root when tried in the storm. Those whose Christianity was solid were not without reminders of the sublimity of their faith. That faith, though kept in secret by the *disciplina arcani*, was yet alive on all sides. One member of the community was enabled to recognise another by tokens or symbols agreed upon. The sign of the cross was sufficient to distinguish a disciple of the Gospel; fish-shaped tokens of ivory were sometimes exchanged for the same purpose, or a password delivered in the Christian assemblies.

It was in the catacombs that these assemblies very frequently took place, and here there is a very mine of symbolic representations which conveyed to the initiated followers of Christ the remembrance of all

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the great mysteries of faith. St. Jerome, who lived but a short period after the death of St. Agnes, describes how he and his fellow-students were accustomed on Sundays and other free days to visit the catacombs and the tombs of the confessors of the faith. And this custom, we may be sure, was a general one with the faithful. In this way the earnest Christian was not deprived of the means of keeping his faith.

St. Agnes may have visited frequently the very catacombs which were later to enshrine her relics.

Cardinal Wiseman, in his preface to 'Fabiola,' has drawn attention to the fact that many of the Saints are portrayed in their special characteristics in the Divine office which the Church uses on their feasts.

St. Agnes he names as one of these. Perhaps the most salient feature insisted upon in her office is that she was ever the spouse of Christ. It seems deducible from this that St. Agnes belonged to that class of the faithful who, following out the Evangelical counsels, had dedicated their chastity to God in order to be 'holy in body and in spirit' (1 Cor. vii.).

These virgins called in the language of ancient inscriptions, and by the Fathers *ancillæ Dei* (handmaids of God) were regarded as the flower of the Christian community: 'Flos ecclesiastici germinis illustrior portio gregis Christi.'* Though probably bound by vows, they dwelt in their own houses, observing such seclusion from the world as their position and circumstances would allow. It is probable, then, that St. Agnes was consecrated to God in

* St. Cyprian, 'De Habitu Virginum.'

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this way. 'She espoused herself to a love most noble by birth and dignity; he had presented her with gifts far above those of any earthly suitor; he engaged her with the ring of faith. . . . He has shown me treasures which have no comparison, and these he has promised to give to me, if only I remain faithful to him.' Such is the language which our Saint uses in rejecting the offer of a worldly marriage. Is it not an explicit and resolute statement of her consecration by solemn promise at least to the love of Jesus Christ?

Some accounts of the Saint's martyrdom represent her to us in her early years as fired with an active zeal for the salvation of souls. In spirit separated from the world, she finds occasion to instruct the ignorant, to visit the sick, and to endeavour to lead abandoned characters back to a love of virtue, thus sharing the labours of those deaconesses who, by their office and election, gave themselves up to these works of mercy.

Charity, attention to the poor, to the friendless and to the afflicted, was the great distinguishing virtue of the Christian, and wide scope for its exercise was to be found in old Rome, with all its lavish splendour and unstinted luxury. There was the slave, an exile from home and friends, dragged into a captivity which scarcely ever was brightened with a ray of human consolation; there was another who would be but too happy to find a respite from the harsh and feelingless treatment of a proud and cruel master or mistress; there was the poor creature who, overcome with hardships and depression, would escape in suffering, to find relief from Christian charity; there were the

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widows whose husbands had succumbed in persecution, children whose parents, in receiving the crown of martyrdom, had bequeathed to Christian charity their helpless offspring. These were the treasures of the Church, and the faithful whose means would allow it turned in many cases their rich dwellings into churches, hospitals, schools and homes for the use of the poorer members of the community.

The noble parents of Agnes were probably no exception to this custom. In such a case Agnes would love to discharge the duties of charity, and carry the light of consolation and joy, as well as material help, to the suffering and distressed.

The Syro-Chaldean 'Acts'* say: 'It came to pass that many Roman matrons, admiring her virtuous deeds and receiving aid from her in their difficulties, often sought her company. Some were attracted by the power and charm of her conversation, others by her purity, and others were induced to imitate her remarkable piety.' In the Menology of the Greeks (p. 27) we are told that: 'She was accustomed to instruct the many women who came to her, and used to exhort them to acknowledge Christ as God.

* Translated by Mgr. D. Bartolini, p. 38.

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CHAPTER V

THE HAWK AND THE DOVE

'Adspicit blandientem, et renuit.'

'She looks on her wooer and rejects him.'

St. Maximus.

A suitor for the hand of Agnes—The Roman Prefect—Hopes of Procus—The suburban villa of the Claudii—Meeting of Procus with Agnes—His disappointment—Firmness of Agnes—Mystical language used by the Saint.

There always was an atmosphere of simple, quiet charm surrounding the life of the noble Roman maiden Agnes—the charm of a holy life. But heroism also dwelt in that breast, beneath the unaffected exterior of the pious virgin. That heroism was soon to be manifested.

Piety is not weakness, nor does virtue mean cowardice. Piety and virtue are the only means by which human nature may be truly raised above itself, and regardless of self, submit to sacrifices which otherwise would shake the constancy of the bravest. The story which we have now to relate is proof of this observation.

How small an event in the designs of an all-wise

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Providence often turns the course of a human life! By one such small but critical event was the quiet and smooth career of Agnes now soon to be broken into.

Agnes was of marriageable age. Her state of life had already been chosen, for, having consecrated her virginity to Christ, she had renounced for ever the idea of earthly nuptials. But her resolve was not to pass without a bitter trial of its earnestness. There was a suitor who had been captivated by the beauty of the young maiden no less than by her gentle manners and modest bearing. All his plans were made; he was going to win her for his wife. He made no reckoning with the likelihood of a rebuff, because he was confident that his high estate, the wealth of his family, his influence in the great capital, his glowing prospects in the future, would commend him at once to any lady whom he should deign to notice. Such were the assurances of Procus, * son of Symphronius, the Prefect of Rome.

To explain, it must be borne in mind that the office of Prefect was one of the highest and most envied in the Government of the Empire. The Prefect was the principal officer of authority in Rome and the neighbouring towns, besides being regarded as a personage of power and influence throughout the whole of Italy. He presided in the Senate; was entitled to wear the royal purple toga; was always escorted by numerous attendants and by the lictors,

* The only document in which the name of the Prefect's son appears is the poem of St. Aldhelm (*vide infra*).

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bearing their *fasces** or rods in sign of his high magisterial power.

Probably there were few young women in Rome whose vanity would not have been gratified by the advances of the Prefect's son. But, had Procus known it, on none could he ply his arts with less hope of success than on Agnes. And yet he had already hopelessly deluded himself with the bright prospect of basking in the favour of this innocent maiden.

In the pride of his social position, and in the full consciousness of the many recommendations he possessed, Procus made bold to approach the parents of Agnes, to discover to them his affection for her, and to point out to all concerned the advantages which would accrue from the proposed union.

Nothing came of their intervention, if, indeed, the subject was ever broached to their daughter. And here was the beginning of his disappointment. Still, the ardour of the youth's passion was but intensified by the delay; the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the parents only confirmed him in his decision to lay the matter himself before Agnes.

Not improbably it was at the suburban residence of the Claudian family that Procus would have planned

* 'The *fasces* were bundles of rods tied together round the handle of an axe with straps. . . . The *fasces* were carried on their left shoulders by the lictors, who walked in front of certain magistrates, making room for them. . . . In case a higher official met his inferior in the street, he was saluted by the lictors of the latter, withdrawing the axe and lowering the *fasces*.'—GUHL AND KONER: *Life of the Greeks and Romans*, p. 584.

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to fall in with the object of his affections and carry out his all-important business.

The Nomentan Way, at the time of which we write, was one of those approaches to Rome which had been rendered gorgeous and attractive by the princely villas and noble gardens of the wealthiest families. The best of Roman society had residences *extra muros* (outside the walls) in places well situated for retirement from the business, noise, and bustle of city life.

At something more than a mile from the walls of Rome was the property of the Claudii, not far from the river Anio (now called Teverone), and far enough in the Campagna to afford a good view on all sides of the country, and always attractive for that rich, bracing atmosphere which is so acceptable to Rome's inhabitants, and even necessary in the sultry season.

Just where the Church of St. Agnes now stands, was then the Claudian villa. It would have been a delight for the devout and virtuous young Agnes to retire here away from the uncongenial crowd and noise of the profane capital whenever charity or any family duty did not engage her attention elsewhere. Here, in the seclusion of the Campagna, she could give herself up to a study of the truths which had so intense a fascination for her. Here, too, were the catacombs, with their chapels and memories of the confessors of the faith.

Here, again, close at hand, were memories of Rome's first Bishop, Peter, and therefore it was a spot dear to every Christian. In fact, in this vicinity, bordering on the *prædiolum*, or little estate of Agnes's

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family, was the Ostrian Villa, where the Prince of the Apostles had received hospitality, and where some of the very first Roman converts had been baptized.* These were all attractions which would make the villa in question doubly dear to the Christian family.

In this secluded spot, we may suppose, Agnes was approached by the unwelcome visitor—a youth with whom in all probability she was, to some extent, acquainted. The reserve and modesty of the young girl left it easy for Procus to enter speedily on the topic which had such full possession of his mind. Agnes did not hinder him with other conversation. That her manner showed her to be impatient of his company, he was too preoccupied to notice. The intention of making the most of this golden opportunity had made him prepare the most persuasive of reasons for pressing his suit, and he had become so convinced of their value himself that he never dreamed of direct refusal.

To the torture and horror of the virgin of Christ, this vain young worldling made his protestations of affection. To promises of boundless generosity he added pictures of the bright, happy life he could procure for her: wealth and ease and luxury should be hers, and the honour of the people; her happiness should be the only object of his thoughts.

Though deeply pained and disturbed in mind, Agnes could say nothing. She was silent, and he thought unmoved.

Procus was disappointed; his heart sank within

* On this further details may be seen in 'St. Peter in Rome,' by Fr. Barnes, p. 335.

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him at the little effect he had caused. What more could he say? How could he obtain a key to her thoughts? He gained a respite by disclosing to her the presents he had purchased for her.*

Agnes turned from them with disdain. Then at last she looked towards him, as though inspired with a will to put an end once and for ever to his addresses.

'Begone from me!' she cried. 'Begone, you who are but an incitement to sin, who are the food of death! Leave me, for I have already another Lover. *He* has bestowed upon me presents far greater than these. He has pledged me with the ring of faith. He is far more noble than you by birth as well as by dignity. He has adorned me with a vesture more magnificent than you can bestow—a vesture of purest gold and diamonds. He has set a mark upon me that I may be known as His spouse. Already we are united, and His blood is the beauty of my countenance. I would not dare set aside this my Beloved, even to turn one glance upon any other. To Him—only to Him—will I give my word of faith! With all the strength of my love I entrust myself to Him!'

'But,' exclaimed Procus—'but, by all the gods! who is this more than powerful Prince who has espoused you?'

'He,' answered the Saint, 'whose Mother is a chaste virgin; He who has the purest of ministers for His courtiers. It is He whose love is always chaste and pure, and whose spouse retains, as her most glorious crown, a spotless virginity.'

Agnes fled, unwilling to be questioned any further,

* 'Detulerat secum pretiosissima ornamenta.'—Acts.

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and Procus remained alone, astounded, disappointed, filled with jealousy. The result of his carefully prepared plan was a simple failure, and he was stung with pain—with pain embittered by jealousy. Who was this other suitor? Who was he that had succeeded where he had failed, who had been able to ingratiate himself with Agnes, and thus cause him such bitter mortification—"one greater, one nobler, than he"?

The baffled suitor retraced his steps citywards, his brain in a whirl of bewildering and torturing thoughts.

Whether in consequence of the contradiction he had suffered, or from some other cause, Procus was soon laid low with a malignant fever. It would seem that in a delirium the trouble of his mind was expressed to those that attended in the sick-chamber. As he recovered consciousness, his father was anxious to know the meaning of those ravings, and grieved to learn that in convalescence the same trouble remained to afflict him. For the sake of the son, whom he loved dearly, he purposed himself trying to forward that business in which Procus had failed. He betook himself privately to the house of Agnes. He reasoned, he implored, he promised; but for him, too, there was but the one answer—that another Spouse had already taken possession of the heart of Agnes, and on no consideration could she play Him false.

The above answers of Agnes to her suitor are taken from the 'Acts.' One translator* points out that it is not hard to follow a mystical sense in her speech. The adornments and diamonds readily suggest the

* Mgr. D. Bartolini.

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BASILICA OF ST. AGNES OUTSIDE THE WALLS, ROME.
(Exterior.)

To face p. 41.

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gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Christian virtues; the vesture of gold is the garment of grace; the mark whereby she is known as the Spouse of Christ is the sign of the cross, or it may be a reference to the character of the Sacrament of Confirmation, which then was administered immediately after baptism; or, again, it may refer to that ceremony of the consecration of virgins, by which many then offered themselves to God. The mystic union tells us of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, which then, as now, was the centre of religion and the delight of every faithful soul.

The expressions given above are only a portion of the answers as recorded in the 'Acts.' It is interesting to note one other here, which Cardinal Bona, in his work on the Mass, refers to as an example of the use of the 'Disciplina Arcani.' St. Agnes is represented as saying: 'I have received honey and milk from his mouth.'*

This was a mode of speech to designate the Holy Communion. It is used also by Tertullian ('De Corona,' 3). He relates a custom of distributing blest salt to the catechumens during the time that they were under instruction, when they were not admitted to the Sacred Table.

'Having been baptized,' says Tertullian in mystic language, 'we taste of the sacrament of unity of honey and milk.'†

* 'Mel et lac ex ejus ore suscepi.'—AMBROSE: *Acts.*

† 'Lactis et mellis concordiam prægustamus.'

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CHAPTER VI

BEFORE THE JUDGE

'Aspicit minitantem et despicit.'

'She faces her judge and despises his threats.'

ST. MAXIMUS.

Symphronius discovers the religion of St. Agnes—She is summoned to answer the charge of being a Christian—She is detained in prison—Description of the dungeon—The Prefect resumes the trial—Fearlessness of St. Agnes—Agnes condemned to be exposed at the theatre of Alexander—Her trust in God—Universal reverence for chastity.

SYMPHRONIUS despaired of being able to influence Agnes in favour of his son, when valuable information was brought to him by one of those parasites who were always to be found in the household of every powerful Roman official. Agnes was a Christian. It was because of a magic infatuation that she was able to show such defiance and to use such mysterious language about her Spouse, Christ the Nazarene!

Here, then, was a new ray of hope—nay, an almost sure means of getting the girl into his power! He might frighten her with threats at once, but he would use his faculties first to break that proud young spirit,

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and meanwhile his son might revive his hope that she would soon be brought to any terms they wished to propose.

Messengers were despatched forthwith to summon Agnes to appear before the tribunal of the prefecture, there to answer the indictment. We can picture to ourselves the consternation of the parents at the entrance of the ministers of the law come to claim their child. Vainly, but yet hopefully, they endeavoured to keep Agnes from them, forbidding any interview with strangers, and striving to persuade these officers of her innocence without permitting her to answer the summons in person.

But delay proved of no avail, and Agnes was led away. She evinced no sign of the fear that might reasonably have been expected under the circumstances.

The hymn of St. Ambrose tells of the fear of the parents and the tranquillity of their child in words that are worth quoting:

> 'Metu parentes territi
> Claustrum pudoris auxerant;
> Solvit fores custodiæ
> Fides teneri nescia.'

The very fact of appearing in so solemn an assembly as the Prefect's court might certainly have sufficed to terrify so youthful and gentle a girl as Agnes. Such was the hope and expectation of Symphronius. He was prepared at first to express his wish to avert a further trial by coaxing her to make her abjuration. But he soon discovered that he was wasting his time. From coaxing and promises he felt himself constrained

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to turn to the severest threats, and then again to appeal to the parents to interest themselves in the cause of their daughter.

Agnes was calm, collected, firm throughout. Hers was not the first instance in which the weak, the young, and the friendless, had, with God's power, withstood the Goliath of evil.

The failure of all attempts at length caused the Prefect to remand Agnes until the following morning. St. Ambrose mentions that fetters and handcuffs were produced, but scarcely were they applied to the wrists and ankles than they fell at once to the ground. The smallest size procurable were all too large for so youthful and delicate a prisoner. So Agnes was merely led off to the gaol—an innocent child amongst a band of rough guards.

There exists in Rome at the present time a typical example of these places of custody. All have heard of the Mamertine Prison. It is a dungeon of two compartments, arranged one over the other. The higher cell is built of immense blocks, in which there formerly was no opening, even for light, except the doorway—a cell that, by its very cold, massive appearance, must have inspired terror and despair. Below is even a more soul-sickening prison. There is no door; the entrance is from a hole above; all around solid, cold masonry, under foot the hard rock; no light could penetrate. It was close, almost stifling, with its damp, earthy smell, and at intervals in the wall are yet to be seen the places in which the chains of the prisoners were secured to immovable iron staples.

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Terrifying as it was for one to be condemned to such a dungeon under the watch of gaolers who might be anything but partial towards the Christian, there is this to be remembered, that access to the prisoner was by no means difficult. We read of the priests being accustomed to visit the condemned, of the deacons carrying to them the Holy Communion, and even of the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice, where several were detained together. Perhaps sometimes it might be needful to offer a bribe to the guard, either in order to obtain admission to the prisoners, or to talk with them secretly on matters of which it would be dangerous to treat within hearing of the pagan. But ways and means were not lacking for the parents of Agnes to gain admittance and exchange sympathies in this harrowing trial.

Next day the case commenced with the request of Symphronius that she should at last come to her senses and finish the proceedings by accepting the proposal which had so repeatedly been proffered. Agnes was in no way changed by the horrors of her prison.

Then the Prefect declared the alternative was that she should answer before all assembled in the court the charge of sacrilege in professing the Christian religion.'

'Yes, I am a Christian,' was the fearless reply, 'and to Christ alone is my fidelity pledged.'

'Clearly, then,' said the judge, 'you are not to be brought to a saner frame of mind except by forcing from you this belief in the superstition of the Christians, through whose magic arts I know you are

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steeled to make such an empty boast. Know, therefore, that you shall at once betake yourself to the temple of Vesta; there, if such be your obstinate intent, you may preserve your virginity under the auspices of that goddess; exercise there your piety by assisting as often as required at her august sacrifices.'

The answer of Agnes was equally determined.

'O Judge, I have refused your son, who is a living being, even though a victim of irregular passion. Think you, then, that I will instead adore idols that are deaf and dumb and lifeless. Think you that I can bow my head to mere stones rather than to the living God?'

Symphronius addressed her once again with simulated calmness:

'I have some regard for your tender age. I refrain from punishing you as I might for this blasphemy of yours, because I know you have not mature judgment, but have a little more thought for your own safety than to provoke thus the wrath of the immortal gods.'

'Pray,' interrupted Agnes cheerfully, 'do not consider my youth. I do not seek your leniency on that account. The faith of Christ is not measured by years; the Almighty looks rather to the heart than to age. Let, then, your gods vent their anger as they can; I fear them not. Let them command that worship be given them. But as I know full well that you aim at compassing that which never can be, act forthwith as it may please you.'

Stung to the quick, Symphronius could have spoken

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the sentence of death at once, and his wounded pride would have found its satisfaction in the secret sense of bitter revenge. He would have experienced no touch of compassion in seeing her led off to the lions, to the rack, or to the stake, weak, defenceless, fragile creature though she was.

Better by far would have been such a condemnation spoken under the impulse of heated anger—better than the cruel, malicious, inhuman course he was suddenly inspired to pursue! Worse than death was the lot to which Symphronius would subject the chaste virgin, and in recurring to so base a torture that pagan judge could only have been prompted by the very spirit of evil himself. This is how he addressed his victim: 'Choose one or the other alternative—either sacrifice to Vesta with her virgins, or you shall be dragged to the place of infamy—the prey of those who have quite other ideas than yours of virtue. There you will find none of those Christians who have deceived you with the idea of being proof against a trial. Wherefore, I repeat, save the honour of your family by sacrificing to the goddess, or you shall work their ignominy by becoming the object of public dishonour.'

Terrible as these deliberate words must have sounded in the ears of an innocent maiden, her constancy was not shaken. Perhaps she recalled instances of Divine intervention in such straits—instances which she may have heard read in Acts of the martyrs at the celebration of the sacred mysteries in the catacombs. She may have called to mind those assurances of the Psalms: 'I am with the just

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in tribulation: I will deliver him and I will glorify him' (Ps. xc.). 'Many are the afflictions of the just, but out of them all will the Lord deliver them' (Ps. xxxiii.). 'The eyes of the Lord are on them that fear him . . . to deliver their souls from death' (Ps. xxxii.).

To the soul imbued with faith these were real, living, burning words—'living and effectual' (Heb. iv. 12). They banished all movements of timidity from the soul of Agnes in that hour of sore trial. So it was that her answer came without hesitation: 'Oh, did you but know who my God is, you would not dare to speak thus! I, knowing the power of my God, can scoff at your threats, confident that I shall neither sacrifice to your idols nor be stained by the violence of enemies! An angel of the Lord is the guardian of my body. And the Son of God Himself, like a strong wall, will protect me. And your gods, what are they but bronze, which were better used to form vessels for daily use, or stone which would better serve to pave the streets. The Divinity does not dwell in stone or metal, but in that kingdom which is above us.'

Whilst Agnes was delivering herself of this bold reply, the fury of Symphronius was gradually swelling to its height, and no sooner had she concluded than, rising, he spoke the shameful sentence: 'Let this maiden, Agnes, convicted of sacrilege and blasphemy against the gods, be stripped and led thus to be exposed in the place of shame.'

In those times of pagan corruption this sentence was not an uncommon one. The law empowered the

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judges to deal in this manner, particularly with the Vestal Virgins, by reason of the ancient custom never to put a virgin to death. Should one of these be convicted of a crime punishable by death, she was first subjected to outrage, and then, being thus dishonoured, she was delivered over to capital punishment.

This atrocious procedure at once recommended itself to the authorities in dealing with Christian virgins. Seeing that they valued their chastity at so high a degree, the threat of being deprived of the same was, humanly speaking, a sufficient shock to make them acquiesce in any other terms. The rack, the scourge, knives, and hot irons, the very amphitheatre itself, had no fear for those who were full of the love and fear of Christ; but the forced privation of the lily of purity might shake the constancy even of those who were prepared to brave all corporal pain, even death itself. Tertullian, in his 'Apology,' taunts the pagans with having recourse to so cowardly a method of persecution: 'In condemning the Christian maiden to the brothel rather than to the lions (ad lenonem . . . quam ad leonem), you confess that the stain of impurity is reputed by us more hateful than all punishment and every kind of death!'

It may be observed here that such a juncture as that in which Agnes, like many other Christian virgins, now found herself was the very occasion when we might naturally expect the intervention of Divine power and aid. For one like Agnes every hope of human succour was gone.

In the hands of a mob of pagan ruffians, what treatment could she expect? She had defied the judge;

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she had declared herself prepared to submit to the severest sentence; she had taken up an attitude which could only be called dogged stubbornness by the populace, an attitude which they would be only too delighted to break by their fury. She had then thrown herself without other hope upon her God, and in so desperate a case she would confidently expect Him to prove to her a 'wall of defence.' In this light it is strange that so many should be ever on the alert to throw discredit upon the miracles related in the history of the saints, particularly those of the period when there must ever have been a special superhuman power animating the soul of the Christian.

We may be allowed to interrupt the course of our narrative to dwell briefly on the nature of that precious virtue which was assailed by the sentence under which Agnes now lay.

At the outset it is curious to note that the respect and reverence for chastity of every degree springs from a natural impulse in man. We may say broadly, without much fear of error, that in all ages and in all times the state of chastity has been regarded as a crown to human life. This is remarkable when we consider to what depths of licentious degradation some sections of the human race have fallen. If the virtue of purity has at times been totally disregarded and apparently decried, that has been either from some supposed utilitarian principle, or because its practice was a check and bar to passion, or because ignorance had blinded man's eyes to the methods of preserving it.* Even in these extremes there was a

* Lecky, 'History of European Morals,' vol. i.

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reverence for the sanctity of virtue. 'Virgins consecrated to God,' says the Count de Maistre, 'are found everywhere and at every epoch of the human race.'* Rome had its Vestal Virgins, who were chosen from the noblest of the nation to guard the sacred fire—the symbol of purity—and to discharge their duty in a fitting manner, they were bound to live in a state of virginity. In the midst of idolatry and licence this worship of Vesta seemed the only means of preserving even a confused idea of the honour of chastity. The Vestals were treated with the greatest respect by all classes. Their house and rich lands were the gifts of the nation; they were maintained at the public expense; their persons were sacred; they were not allowed to go out except accompanied by the lictors, who formed a guard of honour to them. Every magistrate saluted them as they passed. If they happened to meet a condemned criminal in the street the Vestals could claim his release; in a court of law their word was indubitable evidence without an oath.

In such high esteem was the virtue of these virgins held that for a breach of their vow they were condemned to be buried alive. Athens also had its college of sacred virgins similar to the Vestals, to preserve the holy fire in the temple of Minerva.

Amongst the ancient Egyptians and the Gauls, in China, in India, in Peru, we discover the like glorification of this holy virtue under circumstances so curiously at variance with the general tone of morality.†

* 'Du Pape,' liv. iii.

† *Vide* article in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, No. 37, Juillet, 1833.

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Why did men thus honour what they could not bring themselves to practise?

There is no victory so admirable as that of the higher faculties over Nature's lower cravings. Chastity belongs to the cardinal virtue of temperance. To restrain, to control, to hold in check every movement of concupiscence, is to be temperate, and is the act of a superior over the unruly inferior. It is Reason claiming her right to direct natural tendencies, lest by excess she be torn down from her place of superiority to obey the promptings of animal nature.

This is applicable to the whole range of human life where the conflict occurs between spirit and sense; but, inasmuch as there is a peculiar force of degradation in all offences contrary to purity, the victory over any such evil is in a special sense ennobling, and the more complete the conquest the more is the nobility of the chaste one enhanced.

There are three degrees of this virtue. The chastity of Christian wedlock guards the sanctity of the marriage vow of mutual fidelity. The chastity of the unmarried preserves them from violating holy purity in act or word or desire. These are the outcome of Divine precept, which regards the natural state of the generality of Christians. But above precept is the counsel which only the few are invited to follow — the state of voluntary continence, the imitation of that in which lived Christ, the most beautiful among the sons of men; and Mary the Mother of Jesus, the most perfect type of holy womanhood; and Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus;

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and John, the beloved disciple. To imitate these is the object of the vow of virginal purity.

None are obliged, none are regarded as truly counselled even, thus to step out of the ordinary course of human life, unless such counsel be warranted by signs of a sure vocation from above.

To this we may add that to renounce a transient pleasure for God's sake is as much a sacrifice to Him as the offering of the first-fruits of lands or flocks. To seal that renouncement by an irrevocable vow is to render that offering more pleasing still.

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CHAPTER VII

THE VIRGIN'S CROWN

'Incendium attendit et ridet.'

'She sees the fire before her, and beams with joy.'

St. Maximus.

Execution of the shameful sentence—Agnes miraculously clothed by her flowing hair—Further miracles in the place of shame—Procus appears on the scene—His rashness punished—Saved by the prayers of St. Agnes.

The sentence had been spoken in a frenzy of vindictive passion, and straightway the shameless ruffians rushed forward to execute the orders of Symphronius. Rough hands are laid on Agnes to prepare her for the ignominious journey through the streets of Rome. The maiden's soul must have been transfixed with horror, but her constancy remained unshaken. In her countenance she betrayed no trace of her pain; nor did she waver from those sentiments which she had triumphantly expressed to the Prefect. Her trust was not in vain. The barbarous order was carried out to the letter. The delicate and noble 'handmaid of God' was publicly disrobed, but simultaneously her hair, by the power of God, descended and became a veil for her holy modesty, and the

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innocent maiden was spared a torture more bitter than death. Pope St. Damasus says her long flowing hair clothed her even as her own garments. The miracle might have warned off a less bloodthirsty and impure crowd, but they who had assisted at the trial, and had taken a morbid delight in the sentence, were not to be so easily balked of their evil sport. The public crier headed the procession, announcing to all the disgrace of the Roman virgin: 'Agnes, the virgin, found guilty of blasphemy against the gods, is condemned to the house of infamy.' An ancient tradition in Rome points out the spot in which our saint was exposed to the lustful fury of her persecutors. The place is now marked by a church raised to the honour of the holy virgin.

The Romans of the period of which we write were given up entirely to games and sensual pleasures. To satisfy their thirst for diversion of every kind the city was crowded with places of amusement—the circus, the theatre, the amphitheatre and arena. The Circus of Alexander, situated in the Foro Agonale, was one of the largest and most frequented. These places of amusement had nearly always their accompanying places of ill-fame. In many instances the underground cells were used for sinful excesses, and here fallen women gave themselves up to their abandoned trade, making a sordid living out of licentious frequenters of the public games.

It was in one of these repulsive cells that St. Agnes was conducted, to be handed over, a helpless victim, to the profligacy of young libertines. Scarcely was she thrust into this den of vice when a new miracle was

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wrought to preserve her. She had told the judge that an angel of light was her guardian, and here in her helplessness her words were proved true. In visible form the spirit appeared, shedding around a light which forbade any evil hand to be laid upon the virgin or evil eye to gaze upon her.

Agnes's first thought was to give herself up to prayer, to thanksgiving, and to supplication for yet further protection in her apparently hopeless state. And whilst she prayed she beheld before her a vesture of snowy whiteness, with which she clothed herself once more, and, overjoyed, burst forth into a prayer of gratitude:

'I give Thee thanks, O Lord Jesus Christ, that, counting me as one of Thy poor servants, in Thy bounty Thou hast provided me with this vesture, woven by the hands of Thy angels' (Ambrosius, 'Acts' 88).

'Virginity is crowned and rewarded' says St. Maximus of Turin, 'in this very place which was designed to ruin chastity.'

Meanwhile the wonders that had occurred were bruited abroad, and a mixed crowd from all parts hurried to the Circus of Alexander to behold the object of so much talk. By the average pagan all that had occurred was put down to the witchcraft of the Christians, and Agnes was one who had been in a special way instructed in the magic art.

Amongst the crowd came the son of Symphronius, longing still to carry out his unholy desires. The maiden was now his victim, he thought, and easy to bend to his own terms. Foremost of the party of gay youths, the son of the Prefect approached the place of

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Agnes's captivity. The door was thrown open to him, and he found himself standing in the midst of a glorious light, brighter than the noonday sun, which never could penetrate into those dens of darkness. He stood for a moment startled at the wonder before him, but then, mindful of his purpose and of the boasts which his fellows would see him carry out, he moved towards Agnes; but before he could disturb her prayer he stumbled forward lifeless on the earth. An evil spirit, say the 'Acts,' had seized him and strangled the life from his body, or, as Prudentius says, 'An arrow of fire had pierced him through.' In any case, the example was terrible, and in it there was for Agnes a fresh assurance of her safety. No other would dare to cross that corpse to molest her. Wondering that so long a time elapsed before the son of the Prefect came forth to tell the result of his rash purpose, his companions entered the cell, and were awestruck to find what had occurred. In a few moments the cry had passed through the crowd that the infamous girl had by her magic arts slain the Prefect's son. The rumour soon reached the father's ears.

Breathless, he appeared upon the scene, only to prove the truth of the report that had terrified him. His son had incurred the extrême penalty of his temerity. Pale and vindictive, he stood over the corpse of his child, and turned to Agnes.

'With your witchcraft you have been the murderer of my son. Tell me how this has happened.'

'Your son,' meekly answered Agnes, 'entered with evil designs, and no sooner did he move towards me

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than the Angel of the Almighty struck him in my defence.'

'If that be true, then, prove to us that you are not a sorceress; you can surely pray that same great spirit to restore my son to life!'

'Think you that your faith can deserve so great a favour from God? Nevertheless, I refuse not to ask this grace in prayer, if I may be left by you and by this crowd of onlookers.'

The Prefect turned, and, unable to articulate his words, waved away the assembled onlookers, ready to comply with any condition so he might see his son restored to him.

The prayer of the Saint was heard and answered. After a short interval the prison door was opened, and the victim of his own rashness appeared, and rushed through the crowd, exclaiming:

'There is but one only God, the God of the Christians! Vain and useless are our temples, vain are the gods adored in them, vain to think they can act for themselves or for us!' With such-like protestations the youth hurried away from sight.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE MARTYR'S PALM

'Virginis partos canimus beatæ morte triumphos.'

'To-day a virgin's death we sing, a virgin's victory.'
Hymn for Virgin and Martyr.

Death of St. Agnes demanded by the people—Symphronius hands the case over to his Vicar, Aspasius—Aspasius condemns Agnes to be burnt as a sorceress—Miraculous extinction of the flames—The mob again demands the blood of the saint—She is condemned to die by the sword—Death of the saint.

The scene above described did not turn the trend of public feeling, as might have been expected. The haruspices and idolatrous priests were deeply disappointed at the apostasy of the Prefect's son. Acting as though their lives as well as their living were at stake if the mass of the people were influenced by his new ideas, they busily worked up the old theme of sorcery and witchcraft. The people should be loyal to the gods or expect their vengeance. They knew the Christians to be enemies of the gods, of the Emperors, and of the Commonwealth, and they should not flag in their endeavours to stamp out the hateful superstition. The stratagem succeeded. The

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cry was at length caught up with delirious fury: 'Death to the sorceress, the witch that blinds the intellect and denaturalizes the affections of all who come in contact with her!'

The Prefect found himself between hammer and anvil. Clearly his duty was to defend Agnes, and to retract his unjust sentence. But, on the other hand, he knew the priests were a power to be reckoned with. They could straightway obtain a decree of *proscription* against him, and proscription would debar him and his children from all public offices. It might entail the confiscation of his property, and even the forfeiture of his life.

Symphronius was therefore only too glad to snatch at any chance of a compromise. He himself withdrew from the case, and ordered Agnes to be brought before his Vicar, Aspasius.

This Pro-prefect, or Vicar, though a magistrate possessed of lesser powers than the Prefect, could be deputed to act to the full extent of his authority in some cases. Aspasius was in no sense well disposed towards Agnes, and the wild and determined expressions of the populace were sufficient to make him decide speedily upon his course of action. The cry for her condemnation never abated, and that cry was a command which Aspasius felt he must obey. His decision was promptly given. A fire was to be lighted in the public square, and Agnes, the Christian maiden, was to be burned there for being addicted to the magic practised by the Christians.

Agnes was brought forward and placed upon the heap of fuel which was designed to be her funeral pile.

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The stack was fired, and the people pressed around to witness the final tortures of their victim. Wild and sacrilegious shouts arose while the flames were mounting up. The cruel eyes of the persecutors strained through the smoke to see when the child would first wince under the pain of burning. They watched, but watched in vain. The huge tongues of mingled flame and smoke shot out on every side as they gained new strength, but Agnes remained unscathed. Even as she had been preserved from the flames of that passion which had sought her for a victim, by no less a wonder was she also saved from flames of fire. An unseen Power, similar to that which protected and refreshed the three children in the fiery furnace, warded off the flames rising around the Saint, and turned them upon her tormentors. Agnes herself was animated with fresh ardour at the sight of this new miracle. She stood there in a circle of fire, with eyes uplifted to heaven and arms extended, while she gave utterance to that sublime prayer which the Church has preserved in the Divine Office: 'Almighty, ever to be adored and revered, dread Father of my Lord Jesus Christ, I bless Thee, because through Thy only begotten Son I have escaped the threats of godless men, and because I have been led through the path of purity unsullied by the filth of the Evil One. Even now the Holy Spirit refresheth me with heavenly dew. . . . I bless Thee, O Father, worthy as Thou art of highest praise, Who dost render me fearless even in the midst of the flames, and fillest me with longing to go to Thee. Lo! I already behold Him Whom I have trusted; I am about to grasp what

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I have hoped for; I embrace Him Whom I have so ardently desired!' ('Acts')

As Agnes concluded her prayer the flames subsided, leaving her untouched, and the holy virgin remained unmoved, prepared for the next act of barbarity which the fiendish mob around should prepare for her. Their fury and hatred were in no degree lessened by the last phase of their cruelty. The yells, 'Death to the sorceress!' 'Destruction to the Christians!' were again caught up. They re-echoed through the palatial halls around the square. Aspasius was nervous and embarrassed. He felt that the mob was well-nigh beyond control. To postpone the sentence was out of the question, and yet they had been so often baffled that he feared a fresh failure and a renewed outbreak on the part of the populace. Meanwhile the demands for the virgin's blood grew fiercer, and the judge, fearing for his own safety, called upon a lictor to put her to the sword.

Whatever may have been the feelings of the executioner, he had no option but to obey his instructions.

He stepped forward with a show of boldness to the spot where the maiden was still standing. At his approach she fell upon her knees, her eyes turned towards heaven. Did Agnes, like St. Stephen, behold those heavens open to her? Did He Whom her soul loved appear to His virgin spouse? Assuredly the shadow of Christ lay refreshingly on her burning heart. That upward gaze of ecstasy was the last commendation of her soul to her Divine Bridegroom: 'Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.'

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The sacrifice was complete! Another instant and the heavy hand of the lictor had buried his short sword in the virgin's throat.*

Agnes, lamblike and chaste, of such is the kingdom of heaven! That young spirit, gentle and pure, but stronger and firmer than the very ruthless persecutor himself, was at length set free from earthly snares! Out of the fire kindled by Christ in His child-bride's heart her soul, like a thin flame, mounted up to God.

* The different accounts of the death of our saint are at variance. The above is according to the Latin 'Acts' and the Ambrosian hymn. This method (*jugulatio*) of execution was employed on those who had already been condemned, but had not expired under the first sentence.

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CHAPTER IX

THE INTERMENT

'Deposita in pace.'

The corpse of St. Agnes abandoned—Taken by the Christians in procession to the Catacombs—Preparation for the burial—'Deposita in pace.'

After the cruel act which released Agnes from her troubles the mob gradually departed, leaving the body of the victim exposed upon the mound where she had died. Thus to leave a corpse was an extreme penalty. The Romans believed that so long as the funeral rites were not performed a soul could find no resting-place; it could not enter amongst the shades of the departed, but must wander homeless and solitary upon the earth.

This abandonment by the people afforded the friends of Agnes an opportunity of securing the body. We have no record of how the parents of the Saint bore themselves throughout the strain of her trial. Deep and poignant as their affliction must naturally have been, it is not hard to believe that the force which had upheld their daughter had been their stay also. Examples are not wanting to show that grace has claimed even the sacrifice of the

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mother's love; and never can we attempt to measure the endurance of a soul which is upheld by this grace. Nor can we believe that this supernal strength could work less wonders than such as are recounted of mere human heroism—as, for instance, that of the Spartan women, or Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi.

The Roman law allowed all to bury their dead, and hence we read that so many holy women in those days of persecution made it their work of mercy to inter the remains of the martyrs. Saints Praxedes and Pudentiana are well-known examples of this.

Availing themselves of this facility, the parents of Saint Agnes proceeded to carry out the funeral ceremonies. A painting in the Basilica of St. Agnes representing the burial of a martyr helps us to describe this scene. A handful of Christians gathered by night at the place of martyrdom. Their first care was to collect all they could of the victim's blood, in order to keep it as a precious relic. For this purpose they used handkerchiefs or sponges, or, where the earth had been saturated, they scraped it up to be placed in the tomb with the corpse:

> 'Crowds haste the linen vest to stain
> With gore distilled from martyr's vein;
> And thus a holy safeguard place
> At home to shield their future race.'*
>
> PRUDENTIUS.

Then reverently the virginal corpse was placed

* Dr. Rock, 'Hierurgia.'

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upon a bier and covered with a white linen pall.* Silently the bearers moved in procession through the dark and all but deserted streets. It was a small cortège, and not a sorrowful one. To those fervent Christians a sense of separation from the persecuting pagan life about them had become part of their nature, and quite spontaneously did their souls hold commune with Agnes. She had only gone before them '*in the sign of faith*.' Of her present happy state they could have no doubt. From the centre of the city under the shadow of the princely palaces the funeral procession turned in the direction of the Nomentan Gate. Passing out of the city, it proceeded along the Nomentan Way, and continued for some distance outside the walls until it stood within the grounds belonging to the family of the Saint, where the church of St. Agnes actually stands.

All was silent and dark until they reached this spot. But now lights were seen, and subdued voices were heard. The faithful have come out of Rome to assist at the martyr's interment. There were priests with their attendants, as well as the *fossores*, or diggers, of the catacombs. These were easily distinguishable by their tunics marked with the cross. Their dress and badge made this important and honourable class of men very conspicuous in all Christian assemblies. Young maidens arrayed in long and simple white vesture were also present. These, like Agnes, had consecrated their virginity to Jesus

* White was usually the mourning colour for funerals, but with Christians it could have also the signification of innocence (*vide* Guhl and Koner, 'Life of the Greeks and Romans').

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Christ. Others, too, were there, devout men and women who had come to gaze once more upon the mortal remains of her whose faith and constancy had given them fresh courage and fervour.

With torches burning,* all these entered the narrow winding passage of the catacombs, chanting psalms of praise and thanksgiving, and of hope in the glorious resurrection. They descended a narrow stairway and proceeded along the subterranean road of that city of the dead. On either side the palm, the anchor, the dove, and the simple inscription on the marble or stone covering told of the many who there found their last resting-place. In a conspicuous part of the catacomb the body of St. Agnes was placed, still resting on the bier, and all present continued for some time in prayer, or pressed around to venerate those blood-stained remains. To one or other probably that corpse spoke a warning of the lot which might be his or hers on the morrow—*Hodie mihi, crastibi.* And how fervently such a one would raise a soul-felt prayer for that strength which Agnes had evinced to bear off the palm! Another, perhaps, would ask this grace for a friend, a relative already in chains and about to die by the teeth of a lion, or under the loaded lash, or by the sword.

Before interment the body of Agnes was reverently washed, the still fresh blood being preserved either in small vases or on linen cloths. Then the body was wrapped in an ample linen shroud prepared

* The 'Acts' of St. Cyprian describing his obsequies say: 'Cum cereis et scolacibus cum voto et triumpho magno.' And this Saint, too, suffered in the heat of a persecution.

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with spices and perfumes, and over the shroud was wound a long bandage, which, passing round and round the whole length of the corpse, covered even the head.* The body and its last resting-place were sprinkled with holy water,† and then the remains of the glorious martyr were laid in the tomb prepared for them—'*deposita in pace*.' A simple marble slab closed the tomb, and the short legend *Agnes Sanctissima* was all that the faithful required to recall to their minds the fight and the victory, the race and the crown. Everything connected with St. Agnes was too vividly present in the minds of all to need, or to be able, to be expressed upon the cold stone that closed her resting-place. Flowers were strewn about the tomb, and a small oil-lamp lit before it; a phial of incense shed a perfume around, and as the faithful turned to depart they pictured Agnes's soul as a pure lily standing before the throne of God, and emitting a fragrance that lured others on to their home.

* It is probable that the early mode of burial was an imitation of that of our Divine Lord (*cf.* John xix., 39).

† There is some evidence that the use of holy water is of Apostolic origin. In this very catacomb of St. Agnes of which we are writing a fresco painting was discovered representing five figures, each carrying in the left hand a vase similar to that which we now use for holy water. Four of them bear in their right hand a palm-branch, and the fifth holds elevated, as though in the act of sprinkling, a tufted aspergillum (*vide* Rock, 'Hierurgia,' p. 668).

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CHAPTER X

THE FIRST HOLY MASS AT THE MARTYR'S TOMB

'At the table of the Lord we commemorate the Holy Martyrs, that they may pray for us who desire to follow in their footsteps.'—ST. AUGUSTINE in *Jo.* 84.

The Mass, the chief act of worship—Description of various ceremonies in the Liturgy of the Catacombs—St. Emerentiana—Her baptism by blood—Chapel of St. Emerentiana—Her relics interred with those of St. Agnes.

WHILE we consider the faithful paying their tribute of devotion at the altar-tomb of St. Agnes, we may recall that chief of all reunions which took place in such chapels of the catacombs. The Mass was even then the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, the bond of Christian unity, the great mystery of Christ's uninterrupted presence amongst His own.

It goes without saying that in substance the Mass of the early faithful was identical with our own; but it is interesting to find what a close similarity of rites, ceremonies, and prayers we find between our holy sacrifice of to-day and that which was offered in those far-off ages. Nay, much of the beauty of our expressions and rites is lost upon us until we have seen them in their origin, and felt the

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needs which first occasioned them.* No apology is called for, then, if we dwell for a time on an example of an early celebration of the Mass, since it is more than probable that the following description faithfully depicts what actually took place shortly after the interment of our Saint, and, on the other hand, we may there find some useful sidelights upon our present Ordinary of the Mass.†

The day for the celebration of the Mass at the tomb of St. Agnes had been announced perhaps when so many had assembled to accompany her remains to the sepulchre. A deacon had then proclaimed the hour—something after midnight—and had exhorted all to assist at the solemn *synaxis* or gathering of the faithful.

At the hour appointed all were assembled before the enshrined relics of the virgin-martyr. The Bishop (probably on this occasion Pope St. Marcellus) had taken his place upon the throne or chair prepared for him. Around him stood the priests who were to celebrate with him, while deacons and subdeacons, ranged in their respective order, assisted at the altar or saw to the convenient arrangement of the people.

The Mass began without introit.‡ The Bishop

* 'We have here seen the model of the worship of Christ as begun and settled in the practice of the Church in the first ages,' etc.—BINGHAM: *Origines Ecclesiasticæ*, Book XIII., chapter ii., Section 2.

† The guide followed in this description of the Mass is chiefly Dom Fernand Cabrol, O.S.B., 'Le Livre de la Prière Antique,' chapter vii.

‡ The introit only came into use when a psalm was sung during the entry of the celebrant from the sacristy to the altar. In the catacombs, therefore, there was not this interval.

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turned to give a salutation to the faithful: 'Peace be to you,' or 'The Lord be with you.' This was the ancient salutation of the Hebrews under various forms. The people all with one voice answered: 'And with thy spirit.' For the celebrant was their representative at God's throne; he was about to intercede and to sacrifice in their name, and their first prayer was that He might undertake the charge with God's blessing upon him. One cannot refrain from observing here the intimate union amongst all present at those primitive assemblies. *All* responded to the prayers; *all* accompanied in a striking manner every word and every rite. Beautiful, too, was the custom of requiring that children should join particularly in certain public prayers, because their simple humility and innocence had right and worth before God.

To return to the order of the Liturgy. The Litany began in the same way as our Litany of the Saints concludes.* The Bishop made supplication then for the afflicted Church, and all responded together, 'Kyrie eleison' (Lord, have mercy upon us). Other supplications followed for the Bishops, priests, faithful catechumens, and for all the needs of the Church, and at each request all present raised the fervent cry: 'Lord, have mercy upon us.'†

The collect was the grouping together of the prayers of all. It received this name because in this particular prayer the celebrant was said—*colligere*

* 'Litany' is but the Greek word for 'supplication.'

† The retention of this invocation in Greek is a memory of the earliest days when Greek was understood by the majority in Rome, and was used perhaps exclusively in the Liturgy.

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orationem—to collect, gather together the petitions of all. On this occasion the prayer would probably be something in this strain (as given in the Sacramentary of St. Gregory):

'Almighty and everlasting God, who dost choose the weak of this world to confound the strong, grant propitiously to us that, as we celebrate the solemnity of Thy blessed martyr Agnes, so may we experience the benefit of her patronage. Through our Lord,' etc.

To this prayer all would answer together, 'Amen.'

Those prayers which the Church has preserved in the Good Friday service seem to have been very usual collects in those days of trial. For instance:

'Let us pray, beloved brethren, let us pray the all-powerful God to purge the world of all error: to heal the sick: to ward off famine: to throw open the prisons: to break asunder the fetters of poor prisoners: to grant a safe return to travellers: strength to the weak, a harbour of safety to those upon the sea.'

'Oremus, flectamus genua' (Let us kneel to pray), and all prostrated in silent prayer for the objects mentioned until the deacon gave the signal, 'Levate' (Rise up).

Not improbably the diptychs of the living would be read amongst the many intentions of the bidding prayers. A word on these will not be out of place. The diptychs—as the word, derived from the Greek, signifies—were double tablets opening with a hinge, and they were used to inscribe the names of the faithful for whom prayers were to be asked, as the Sovereign Pontiff, Bishops, certain of the clergy, eminent benefactors, and so forth. The exterior of

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the covers of these tablets were ornamented, sometimes very richly, and it was a mark of great distinction—in some cases a sort of canonization—for one's name to be thus inscribed.

After the collect came the reading from the letters of the Apostles. On an occasion like the commemoration of St. Agnes it would be an account of the martyrdom, perhaps prepared by the Bishop himself. Then a psalm was sung, and the deacon read a passage from the Gospel to be expounded by the Bishop, who ended his homily with the customary salutation, 'The Lord be with you.' After the response he exclaimed, 'Let us pray.' Then followed a brief interval spent in private prayer. All stood with hands extended (as the priest now does at certain portions of the Mass), and made this prayer in silence. 'We extend our hands,' says Tertullian, 'in memory of our Saviour's passion.'

Before the ceremonies proceeded the deacon gave notice to the catechumens (those still under instruction), to the penitents, and others who were not strictly reckoned amongst the faithful, that they had to retire. The more solemn approach to the sacrifice now commenced. So far it was the Mass or service of the catechumens; here began the Mass of the faithful.

The offertory was made. Each one present made his offering in kind, in order to unite himself with the solemn act. Some provided the bread and wine for the sacrifice, others presented necessaries for the poor or for the support of the clergy, but all brought their share. It was regarded as a sacred duty. The elements of bread and wine being placed upon the

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altar, a little water was mingled with the wine to signify the union of the people with Christ—an 'intimate, inseparable union,' as St. Cyprian has explained. The prayer accompanying this ceremony is still extant, and beautifully expresses this thought:

'O God, who, in creating human nature, has wonderfully dignified it, and still more wonderfully reformed it, grant that by the mystery of this water and wine we may be made partakers of His Divine nature who vouchsafed to become partaker of our human nature—namely, Jesus Christ our Lord, Thy Son, who with Thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, liveth and reigneth God through all ages of ages. Amen.' Before going on with the prayer 'over the oblations' (now called the *Secret*), the celebrant invited all to pray with him, that their sacrifice and his might be acceptable in God's sight. In the *Secret* prayer he besought the Almighty to accept the earthly offerings, and in return to bestow His celestial gifts.

As the service advanced the prayers became more solemn. 'The Lord be with you,' said the Bishop. The faithful responded, 'And with thy spirit.' 'Raise up your hearts.' And all again answered: 'Our hearts are raised unto the Lord.' 'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.' The invitation was answered by all: 'It is truly meet and just.' They were about to enter upon the great mystery of Thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

The Bishop continued, enumerating the benefits for which the gratitude of all was due, amongst them the triumph of Agnes, great example of fortitude and

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chastity. In the above-mentioned Sacramentary we find this preface:

'It is truly meet and just . . . to recall also the circumstance of the passion of Blessed Agnes, who, despising the allurements of earthly proposals, has won a grade of dignity in heaven; contemning the much-prized ends of human society, is now possessed of the companionship of the Eternal King, and submitting to a precious death, for the glory of Christ has become conformable to His immortality and glory, etc.'

Thus recounting actual benefits received from God in the Christian community, the Bishop was led up to repeat that source of all blessings—the priceless heritage which the Divine Master bequeathed at the Last Supper—namely, His own presence for the life of the world. As the mouthpiece of the Saviour, and under His commission, with the sacred sign of the cross,* the Pontiff pronounced these wondrous words upon the elements of bread and wine: 'This is My body; this is My blood.' And all present knew by faith that it was once more 'the Supper of the Lord.' His Body again was given for them, His Blood again poured out for them.

The Bishop recalled the terms of the Lord's charge to His ministers: 'Do this in commemoration of Me,' and then recounted the mystery, of which the Holy Sacrifice is the commemoration in its external aspect, and contains the reality beneath the mystic signs.†

* The sign of the cross was always used, as now, in the Sacraments (Bingham, p. 770).

† *Cf.* the prayers recited by the priest in our Liturgy.

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The canon ended with the Doxology, or praise to the ever-blessed Trinity through Christ, there present as High Priest and Victim; and all answered, 'Amen.' All that followed had an intimate connection with the Holy Communion.

The Sacred Bread of Life was broken to be distributed to the faithful, a prayer for the union of all in Christ being recited meanwhile. Then the deacon admonished those that were not prepared to approach the sacred table to depart; but all had come with that intent, as was usual in those troublous times, for the Holy Eucharist was the source of their strength under persecution.

'Sancta sanctis!' the deacon proclaimed. 'The holy things for those that are holy.' And the answer of the people was: 'Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the Son of David!'

Then a prayer was recited for the dead, whose names were read from the diptychs kept for registering the faithful departed.

All repeated aloud the *Pater Noster* (*Our Father*); and this prayer, wherein all profess to forgive trespasses against them, was followed by the kiss of peace. It was the symbol of universal reconciliation, and, according to Tertullian's pregnant expression, the '*Signaculum orationis*' (the seal of their prayer). Probably the clergy received one another to this embrace of Christian charity—the men performing the same ceremony mutually and the women in the same way amongst themselves.

Then the Communion took place. The celebrant and clergy having communicated, a portion of the

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blessed Sacrament was reserved to be taken by the deacons to the sick and imprisoned.

The faithful approached the sanctuary, and the Bishop deposited the consecrated species upon the extended right hand of the communicant, repeating the words, 'Corpus Christi' ('The Body of Christ'). Afterwards a deacon presented to each the consecrated chalice, saying: 'Sanguis Christi, calix vitæ' ('The Blood of Christ, the chalice of life'). And each of the faithful answered to the words, *Amen.*

The Communion over, an expressive prayer of thanksgiving was offered in the name of all. Then the deacon bade them prepare for the blessing, in terms of which we have an example in our Lenten Mass, *Humiliate capita vestra Deo* ('Humbly bow your heads before God'). They all inclined while the Bishop pronounced the formula or prayer of benediction. The following is a very ancient form of such blessing:

'Copulet sibi Deus animas vestras nexu perpetuo qui beatam Agnetem sibi sociavit fœdere sempiterno.'*

'May God unite your souls to Himself in everlasting bonds who has received Blessed Agnes into His company with an eternal covenant.'

All respond, 'Amen.'

'Per eam quoque obtineatis apud Deum vestrorum veniam criminum

'Through her also may you obtain from God the remission of your sins, as

* Mozarabic rite (*vide* Bartolini, p. 175).

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per quam juvenis ille promeruit suscitari a tenebris inferorum, Amen.'

through her that youth received the favour of being restored from the darkness of death. Amen.'

'Ut ipsius post hanc vitam mereamini adunari consortiis, cujus nunc festum devotissime celebratis. Amen.'

'That after this life you may merit to be united in the companionship of her whose feast you now devoutly celebrate. Amen.'

The sacrifice was now complete; all had partaken in faith and love of the Food which fortifies and sanctifies, and the deacon announced that the congregation might depart.

It was but shortly after midnight that these faithful had assembled, and already the dawn was breaking. As they left the catacombs to choose their various ways homeward, they were met by slaves and artisans hastening to their work. Perhaps here and there they heard some passer-by refer in audible tones to 'those men that fear the light,' or to those 'birds of ill-omen that infest the darkness of night.'

Such ridicule was only what the Christian might daily expect, and willing he was to bear it, if only there were left to him the consolations of his sublime faith.

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CHAPTER XI

THE CHRISTIANS AT THE TOMB

Suspicions of the pagans at the constant visitation of the catacombs—The Christians surprised in the catacombs by their enemies.

The tomb of the virgin-martyr became immediately a centre of attraction to the devout Christians of Rome. Each day found small groups of them wending their way along the Nomentan road to visit the now sacred spot, and perhaps to assist at the Divine mysteries.

The constant devotion thus aroused was brought to the notice of the pagan priests. The law forbade them to disturb a tomb, nor could they find any chargeable offence in the action of the frequenters of the catacombs. Resolved, however, to combat this devotion of the people, they were not long in finding men who at their bidding would harass and disperse these Christian assemblies.

Only a few days after the burial of the Saint the tomb was surrounded by a group of the faithful, when, on a sudden, loud yells, threats, and execrations broke the silence of the catacombs. Terrified, the Christians rapidly dispersed into the narrow windings, which were accessible in every direction.

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In the rush, some met their rough insulters, and, being without means of defence, were injured by stones hurled by them.

One young girl, standing close by the tomb of the Saint, showed herself unwilling to be disturbed, and waited till she was face to face with the ruffian intruders. Fearlessly she addressed herself to them: 'Impious men! why will you slay those who adore the omnipotent God? why persecute us who are innocent of any crime?'

As she was speaking, one of the mob rushed at her and threw her to the earth; the others brutally poured a shower of stones upon her until life was extinct.

At the very tomb of Agnes, Emerentiana—for she was the fearless maiden—was united in martyrdom with her foster-sister.

Emerentiana was yet a catechumen, so that her martyrdom was also for her a baptism of blood.*

This new martyr was buried by the parents of Agnes 'on the confines' of the land appertaining to the family of Agnes—that is to say, in the Ostrian cemetery or catacomb. This catacomb had formerly belonged to the Roman family Ostorii, and from their gift had probably become the possession of the Christian community as one of their general places of sepulture. Containing as it did memories dear to the Christian mind, the spot was valued by them.

The tradition was that St. Peter had been hospitably received by the Ostorii on his arrival in Rome under Claudius, A.D. 42.

* St. Zoe is said in the 'Acts' of St. Sebastian to have died thus whilst praying at the tomb of St. Peter.

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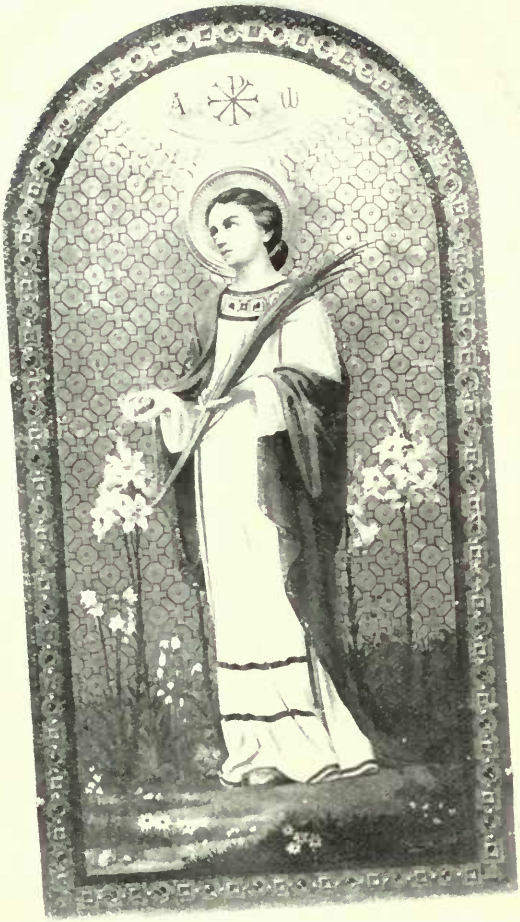

ST. EMERENTIANA, V.M., FOSTER-SISTER OF ST. AGNES.

To face p. 81.

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As there was an abundant supply of water on their land, it was found a convenient spot for the semi-public baptism of the first converts to Christianity.

In the year 1876 the discovery of a crypt in the Ostrian cemetery aroused some interest amongst archæologists. A partially-effaced inscription gave the name Emerentiana in full, and the whole received the following conjectural interpretation: 'Hic sedit prius S. Petrus, hic requiescit S. Emerentiana, Damasus Antistes ornavit cultu meliori.'* An ancient stone chair was found in the crypt, which has obtained the name of the 'Chapel of the Chair.'

It seems that the relics of St. Emerentiana were at an early date removed to a chapel or church above the catacomb of her interment. Eventually (probably under Pope Paul I., when many relics were removed from the catacombs for fear of their being desecrated by the barbarians)† the remains of the sister-martyrs were placed together in the church dedicated to St. Agnes, where they are still together venerated.

The writer of the 'Acts of St. Agnes' (Ambros. 'Act. S. Agn.,' v. 3) further relates that on the occasion of the martyrdom of St. Emerentiana, Rome was visited by an earthquake and sudden storms of thunder and lightning, which soon dispersed in terror the assailants and proved so effectual a warning that henceforth the Christians were left to their veneration of the martyr's tomb without danger of further molestation.

* 'Here St. Peter first sat (as Bishop); here rests St. Emerentiana, Damasus, Bishop adorned (this chapel) with greater splendour.'

† It was at this period that the Roman Empire was invaded and infested by the pagan hordes coming from the north.

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CHAPTER XII

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS

'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians.'
TERTULLIAN.

Apparition of St. Agnes to her parents—Encouragement to them and to the whole Christian community—Triumph of the faith under Constantine.

THE affectionate devotion of the faithful for the new heroine of Rome did not wane. Daily her tomb was visited; daily they assembled together and recalled her victory.

Foremost amongst the devout clients of St. Agnes were her own parents, expecting, as well they might, the greatest share in her intercession and protection. On the night of January 28, seven days after the cruel martyrdom, the cubiculum or oratory of the tomb was the scene of a wondrous vision. The parents of Agnes with a few friends knelt in the feebly-lighted chamber. All was silent in that underground chapel. Around on every side were the sealed graves of the departed—all calculated to inspire them with the saddest thoughts were it not for the faith which burned bright and warm within the heart. And whilst they prayed for the increase of this faith a

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gladdening sight was vouchsafed to them. In the midst of a glorious radiance which suddenly broke forth there appeared a train of virgins, clothed in white robes glistening with adornments of gold and precious stones, and conspicuous amongst them she whose mortal remains rested close at hand. St. Agnes led on her right side a lamb of snowy whiteness. In her passage she stayed to gaze upon those assembled, and in tones of intense affection she spoke thus:

'Do not mourn for me as dead, but rather rejoice with me that with these, my companions, I have attained to the bright dwelling of my eternal home; that I am now united with Him whom, when on earth, I loved with all the power of my being.'

The apparition then vanished from sight. Only for a few moments did the parents of Agnes enjoy the soul-inspiring vision, but it left within them a new ardour for their holy faith, a desire more keen than ever that they, too, might soon attain the happy state to which Agnes had preceded them. The same effect was produced in all the Christian community. The news was everywhere received as an exhortation to fresh courage, and as an earnest that as Agnes had triumphed, so, too, would the whole persecuted Church.

This triumph was then not far distant. We suppose the death of St. Agnes to have occurred in the year 304. It was in 312 that the harassed spouse of Christ was able to move from the catacombs and hiding-places of Rome, to present herself in all her beauty before the world.

In 305 Diocletian and Maximilian abdicated the

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imperial purple in favour of Galerius and Constantius, and within a short time the reins of government passed to Maxentius and Constantine, the latter having been proclaimed Emperor by the army, as he had won the affections of his men in Britain and Gaul.*

Disagreement soon parted the two *Augusti*, and war broke out between them. Constantine appeared near Rome, and prepared to withstand his colleague. Before the attack, Eusebius relates, Constantine had recourse to the God of the Christians, and besought Him to extend His arm of might over his campaign. The time for the deliverance of God's people had arrived, and to Constantine as the instrument in God's hand was a sign of His power given. About mid-day, says the historian, there appeared in the heavens a trophy-like figure of a cross (*σταυροῦ τρόπαιον*) composed of light, and above it appeared the legend, Ἐν *τούτῳ νίκα* ('By this conquer'). The portent was witnessed and wondered at by all the troops.

Furthermore, the same night the Emperor was favoured by a vision of the 'Christ of God.' He bore that same sign which had appeared in the sky, and bade him obtain a copy of the same to be carried as his standard in war. Gold-workers and jewellers were at once summoned to execute this behest. A gorgeous

* Maxentius began well, and even made himself out to be a Christian; but he was at heart avaricious and superstitious. His avarice would lead him to weave a pretext for death out of mere petty offences, and in his superstition he went so far as to consult the auspices in the entrails of new-born infants.

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and costly banner was made, consisting of the monogram ☧ (the first two letters of the Greek name of Christ, ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ) surrounded by the imperial crown. This was the standard which supplanted the old Roman eagles and representations of the idols in the Roman army.

Under such auspices the troops led by Constantine marched against Maxentius.* A fierce and bloody encounter took place at the Milvian Bridge (Pons Milvius), not far from the city, and Maxentius, forced back upon the river, met a fearful death in the waters of the Tiber.

This was the death-blow to Roman paganism. Shortly after, the Emperor Constantine, sole ruler of the vast Empire, entered the city amid a grand display of triumph, that same sacred sign of the cross which hitherto was hidden from public view now borne aloft as the very source of victory.

A statue of the first Christian Emperor soon rose in the *Forum*, the centre of the city's life and movement, and it bore that same standard with the inscription: 'That through this salutary sign, a symbol of true strength, he had delivered the city from the yoke of the tyrant.'

Near by the Coliseum, so often the scene of the sacrifice of Christian life, arose the Arch of Constan-

* 'Two religions, two worlds, found themselves face to face on the banks of the Tiber, weapon in hand. The *Labarum* floated above the eagles, and the land of Saturn saw him rule who preached upon the mountain.'—Chateaubriand, cited by Madame Belloc, 'Ste. Agnès.'

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tine, recording the triumphal entry of the Christian Emperor into Rome.

From far and near congratulations were poured in upon the new Emperor, and thousands followed his example, embracing the religion of Christ.* The cross shed its lustre on every side. Christian governors were sent to the provinces. No sacrifice was to be offered to the idols in the Emperor's name; where the pagans decreased in numbers the temples were overturned or transformed into Christian churches. The idols were placed on the highways that all belief in them might be lost. Some attachment to the old religion lingered on still in the city of Rome, and Constantine moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, the city on the Bosphorus which was called after him. Here all was Christian, and under the blessings of the Cross arose the Empire and civilization of the East, which in early times has contributed to the Church some of her most shining lights.

* Constantine's life was not without blemish. The murder of his son Crispus has remained a blot against his name throughout all history. Still, his legislation was of supreme benefit to Christianity, and enabled it to operate at once its beneficent effects. Punishment by the cross was abolished, and slavery forbidden, with the barbarous custom of branding slaves with the hot-iron. Even Renan, the freethinker, admits: 'The new faith made slavery impossible.' — H. Marucchi: *Elément. d'Archéologie*, vol. i., p. 72.

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CHAPTER XIII

DEVOTION AT ROME

Churches dedicated under the name of St. Agnes—Church in the Foro Agonale—Legend of St. Constantia—The basilica outside the walls—Constantia founds a house of Christian virgins near the tomb of St. Agnes—Pope Liberius sojourns here at the time of his banishment—Description of the Basilica.

Few of the saints have been so universally revered as St. Agnes. Whether the cause of this widespread devotion is to be found in the wonderful story of her passion, or in unrecorded miracles wrought at her intercession, we cannot judge. But evidence from all parts of the world speaks of the love with which her memory has been cherished in the Church.

That the tomb of Agnes should change into a shrine of warm devotion can cause no surprise. So favourite a patroness did she become to the Roman people that their piety has erected two magnificent churches in her honour.

Several modern archæologists* accept the ancient tradition that the church within the walls stands upon the spot where the innocence of Agnes was exposed. According to the 'Acts,' the holy virgin was

* Mariano Armellini and Marucchi, vol. ii., p. 260.

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thus tried *juxta theatrum* (close by the theatre). There seems little doubt but that a theatre, or place for public spectacles, stood near the position of the actual church, since this quarter of Rome, the ninth region (*Circus Flaminius*), contained a numerous group of public monuments—the Pantheon, the baths of Agrippa (or Alexandrine baths), and the present large and beautiful square, on one side of which the church stands, was the Stadium of Domitian. (The Stadium was a large open space curved or rounded off at two opposite ends, and was used for public games and contests, hence called *Circus Agonalis*.) The existence here of the Thermæ and of the Stadium would also argue the presence of the *Lupanar*, or *cella meretricia*, the place of ill-fame.

The date of the first foundation of a chapel cannot be determined. The present building was raised under Pope Clement X. in 1672, from the designs of Rainaldi and Borromini. According to the style of the time it is highly ornate, both in architecture and in display of marble and painting. It is in the form of a Greek cross, and is surmounted by a large and stately dome, and two pinnacles rising form the façade.

A curious story is told of the statue of St. Agnes, which stands in a strikingly lonesome position on the front of the church.*

Directly opposite to the church, in the centre of the piazza, is a very elaborate fountain. An obelisk forms the centrepiece, and at the four corners of its

* Pio Franchi ('S. Agnese nella trad e nella leggenda') does not regard the tradition as sufficiently supported by evidence.

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base are four gigantic figures representing the four quarters of the world. One of these is a negro, who is represented as crouching down in an attitude of fear, with his arm upraised to defend his head from a blow. Bernini, the designer of this fountain, is said to have wished to depreciate the merit of the architect of the church, and made his negro express by his attitude a fear that the building would fall and crush him. Borromini retorted. He placed the statue of Agnes in its solitary position, with one hand laid upon her breast, as though to say 'My Church is in my keeping.'

It is in the basilica outside the city walls that the memory of the saint is preserved with greatest affection. Relative to its foundation the 'Acts' have a legend which may be given here. Constantia, or Constantina, daughter of Constantine, was afflicted with an incurable malady which rendered her whole body one loathsome and horrible wound. Though not a Christian, she was induced to have recourse to the intercession of St. Agnes, and so intense was the earnestness with which she pleaded for her recovery at the tomb of the virgin-martyr, that she merited a speedy response to her prayers. While she prayed she was overtaken by a gentle slumber, during which she seemed to see St. Agnes and to hear herself addressed to this effect: 'Constantia, be thou constant; place thy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for He is the Saviour through Whom thou shalt obtain restoration to health.'

On coming to herself again, the Princess discovered that the vision and promise were no dream. In

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perfect health she returned to the palace, where the news of the wonder caused supreme joy and gratitude. The rejoicing swept through the city; the faithful assembled to give expression to their feelings, and all the Christian community, from the Court to the slave, joined in the exultation.

Constantia resolved to mark her appreciation of the favour received by erecting a basilica in honour of the Saint, just as so many of the martyrs were already venerated in the oratories and chapels raised to their memory.

The Church of St. Agnes should rise above her tomb, where the votaries of the Saint might feel more in touch with her, and where the cure of the princess had been effected. The legend tells us that, with the co-operation of the Emperor, this desire of his daughter was carried out;* moreover, that Constantia persevered in virginity, that she, together with a goodly number of young women from amongst the noble as well as from the plebeian families, received together the veil of religion, which marked them as consecrated spouses of Christ.†

* 'Anastas. biblioth. in vita Silvestri.' Constantine erected the Basilica: 'Rogatu Constantinæ filiæ suæ.'

† It was always a tradition, though without much positive proof, that even from those early times this conventual life had been maintained there. The recent excavations at *St'. Agnese* have brought to light a tomb-stone, beginning: 'Hic requiescit in pace, Serena *Abbatissa*, *S.V.*,' etc. ('Here resteth in peace the Abbess, Serena, a holy virgin'). The stone bears the consular date of A.D. 514 (Cassiodorus). This is the year in which the *Abbatissa* died, aged eighty-five. This would seem to show a probability of a well-constituted monastery being in this neigh-

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Constantia is, then, said to have made her abode within the precincts of the cemetery of St. Agnes. Pope Liberius, who had been banished from Rome, attempted a return to his See about A.D. 358. Before entering the city he, too, sojourned for a time close by the place where the relics of Agnes lay. His hope was that the Princess Constantia might influence the Emperor to render his entrance to the city safe and his dwelling there secure for the future.

The flagrant anachronisms in all this legend have caused some authorities to discredit the whole account and pronounce the verdict that Constantia *as a saint* is a myth, and the whole story a mere fable.* Others have refrained from so summary a treatment of the legend, and have offered various explanations.

Without attempting to weigh the arguments for the various opinions, it seems at least most probable that the Church of St. Agnes, which now rises above the tomb of the virgin-martyr, owes its origin to a noble lady of the name of Constantia, or Constantina. Besides the frequent mention of the name in connection with the Basilica, a church adjoining that of St. Agnes has been dedicated in the name of a St. Constantia. An inscription once existed on the

---

bourhood in the middle of the fifth century, and thence there seems reason to connect this evidence with the tradition with which St. Constantia's name is coupled. This discovery has been a valuable one, as the earliest mention of the title of *Abbess*. It is anterior to the time of St. Benedict.

* Pio Franchi, 'S. Agnese nella tradizione e nella leggenda,' chapter viii. M. Dufoure, 'Étude sur le Gesta Martyrum Romain,' part ii., chapters ii. and iii.

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apse of the Church of St. Agnes mentioning the origin of the foundation. Translated it was as follows:

'Constantia, venerating God and dedicated unto Christ, being inspired by God and aided by Christ, with devout mind gathered together all the treasure required, and has had consecrated this temple to the victorious virgin, Agnes. It surpasseth all other temples and every earthly memorial, for the golden heights of its roof shine with splendour. In these high thrones the name of Christ is praised, since only He could overthrow the enemy, death, and ascending to heaven, could bear thither His triumph. Exalting the name of Adam in Himself, He raised up His body and all His members from the darkness and sable night of death. Therefore from our wealth shalt thou possess this worthy offering, O Blessed Virgin Agnes, of honoured name, denoting thee as a martyr and consecrated unto Christ.'*

* 'Constantia Deum venerans Christoque dicata,
Omnibus impensis devota mente paratis,
Numine divino multum Christoque juvante,
Sacravit templum victricis virginis Agnes
Templorum quod vincit opus terrenaque cuncta.
Aurea nam rutilant summi fastigia templi.
Nomen enim Christi celebratus sedibus istis,
Tartaream solus potuit qui vincere mortem
Invectis cœlo solusque inferre triumphum.
Nomen Adæ referens et corpus et omnia membra,
A mortis tenebris et cœca nocte levata.
Dignum igitur munus, martyr devotaque Christo
Ex opibus nostris per sæcula longa tenebis,
O felix Virgo memorandi nominis Agnes.'

It will be noted that these are acrostic verses, the first letters of the lines forming the dedicatory words: *Constantina Deo* (Constantina [offers] to God).

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It seems also probable that the first Christian Emperor was munificent in beautifying the shrine which rose above the remains of Rome's cherished Saint. He was of necessity drawn to those centres of Roman devotion and veneration in which were celebrated the first victories of Christ's Church. The Vatican was a sacred spot as the last resting-place of Rome's first Bishop. The site of Paul's martyrdom on the Via Ostensis, the shrine of Laurence at the Agro Verano, on the road to Tibur, the various catacombs where the ineffable Sacrifice had been offered, the Sacraments administered, and where the present generation of Christians had learned the mysteries of Christianity—all these were places of veneration to the faithful, and all claimed attention from the ruler who had conquered by the sign of the cross. Of the original building we could not expect to find many remains after sixteen centuries. The present Basilica is perhaps more beautiful. The approach to the graceful, interesting shrine is by a descent of some forty-five steps of marble, the walls on each side forming a veritable museum of inscriptions unearthed in the surroundings of the 'cemetery.' At one time these steps led down to massive doors of bronze. Under Sixtus V. these doors were taken down and used to cast the two colossal statues of St. Peter and St. Paul, which now stand on immense columns, called respectively the Traiana and the Antonina. In place of the doors there is now a screen of metal-work, passing through which one enters directly into the church.

The sacred building seems to inspire the soul with

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a feeling of the most profound peace and tranquillity. The pure and simple architecture suggests that it is the shrine of innocence and purity. The lamps, thirteen in number, which burn around the tomb are proof of a living, actual veneration. The magnificence of marble column and arch, of bright gilding and of wonderful mosaic, tells at once of the devotion which yet lives for the martyr and child, Agnes.

The Basilica is formed of three naves separated by marble colums of immense value. The lower columns and arches support a higher set running to the roof and enclosing a gallery called the *matronco*.

The roof of the church, which is flat, is gorgeously decorated in white and gold, and contains statues in relief of Saint Agnes, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and Saint Cecilia. In the spaces above the capitals of the pillars are paintings of various saints, in whom the faith of succeeding ages has seen some trait of virtue similar to those of St. Agnes.

The high altar, the frontal of which is a choice work of inlaid marble and mother-of-pearl, is surmounted by a marble baldachino, or canopy, resting on four pillars of porphyry. Upon the altar stands a statue of the Saint in Oriental alabaster, with head, hands, and feet of bronze.* The apse is decorated with an extensive mosaic with three figures. St. Agnes stands in the centre, with the legend above,

* The body or trunk of the statue was an antique fragment. Mgr. Bartolini in his work on the 'Acts,' relates that in 1709 Coynens Middleton, Doctor of Theology of Cambridge, published a work instituting a comparison between Catholicism and paganism, and offered as an illustration that the Catholics of Rome had turned a statue of Bacchus into a St. Agnes!

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'Sta Agnes.' The Saint is represented clothed in rich costume of Grecian style, her brow encircled with a crown of precious stones, and a chain of pearls about her neck; her feet rest upon the sword with which she received her death-blow, and on each side flames dart up, enveloping her without causing the injury they naturally should.

On the right hand of Agnes stands the Pope, Honorius I., holding in his hand a model of the church which he had restored; on the left, Pope Symmachus, holding in his left hand the book of the Gospels, and extending the right as in the act of conferring the blessing.

At the right hand of the high altar is the chapel of the Arch-Sodality of the Children of Mary. No more suitable model could be chosen to set before the minds of the members of the confraternity.* Faith, the love of Jesus Christ above all the vanity and glitter of this life, a regard for retirement, modesty, piety and chastity, were the virtues which shone with intense lustre in the life of the child-martyr of thirteen.

Where can they better learn these virtues, of so vital a necessity in our times, than at the tomb of Agnes? The glory which yet encircles her relics after this long lapse of time teaches the lesson that faith and love overcome the world, and win a victory of never-ending glory! 'This is the victory which overcomes the world, your faith.'

In the Arch-Sodality chapel is a large painting of

* 'Videte ergo quo modo sequitur Agnes Mariam, per opprobria' ('See how Agnes has imitated Mary in trial).'—St. Maximus: *Hom.*

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the Madonna with Agnes kneeling at her feet, presenting to her a group of maidens wearing the medal of the confraternity. On the right of the altar is a marble bust of Abbot Passeri, Canon Regular of the Lateran, one of St. Agnes's most fervent clients and a devoted friend of all children of Mary. Walking in the footsteps of the Canons Regular, Blessed Peter de Honestis and St. Peter Fourier, Abbot Passeri, then parish priest of the Nomentan Basilica, succeeded in establishing a centre for the girls' branch of the Children of Mary at the shrine of the girl-martyr, his virginal patroness. Pius IX. blessed the happy inspiration, raised the Sodality to the dignity of a Primaria, or Arch-Sodality, and enriched it with many privileges and indulgences.

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BASILICA OF ST. AGNES OUTSIDE THE WALLS, ROME.
(Interior.)

To face p. 90.

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CHAPTER XIV

ST. AGNES AND HER LAMBS

'St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn.'
KEATS.

Feast-day of St. Agnes, January 21—Pilgrims visit the shrine—Solemn Mass—Blessing of the lambs—The pallium.

AT no time does the Church of St. Agnes appear to such advantage as on the Saint's festival day. At no time is the extent of her devotion evinced as on this day, the twenty-first of January—surely a great day in the annals of Christian Rome. 'It is the birthday of the Holy Agnes,' exclaims the saintly Bishop of Milan, Ambrose; the birthday, because the Church looks upon her child's entry into endless bliss as a birth to a new life. The long route from the city walls to the basilica is from an early hour the scene of one continuous pilgrimage. The inhabitants of Rome make their special visit to the Saint's tomb on this day, but they are outnumbered by the pilgrims of other lands, English and French and German. Cardinals, Bishops, and priests esteem it a privilege that morning to offer in the Holy Sacrifice the Immaculate Lamb, over the tomb of the child-Saint,

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whose lamb-like innocence rendered her so pleasing a victim to the Lamb of God.

Mass follows Mass; the faithful in numerous groups approach the sacred table, drawn there by the glory of Agnes's faith, confident of returning with some meed of strength and grace through Agnes's intercession.

The first crowds of worshippers have come and gone, and again, as the day advances, the basilica fills up with a cosmopolitan assemblage for the pontifical Mass. The church is magnificently adorned: chandeliers hang at every arch, the columns are draped with damask and gold; the altar shines and glows with its many lamps and brilliant flowers, in the centre of which stands the massive reliquary of crystal and gilding, at the feet of the statue crowned with the costly diadem of precious stones, the gift of Pius IX. The Mass is sung by the Abbot of Sant' Agnese, assisted by his religious brethren, the Canons Regular of St. John Lateran, assembled from their various houses in the City.

The ceremony, which attracts a large number of the people present, takes place at the conclusion of the Mass. At the Gospel of St. John one expects a commotion, and a sound of half-suppressed voices through the church. The temporary disturbance and distraction are inevitable, for all present strain to catch a first glimpse of the two snow-white, spotless little creatures which are being carried to the altar. The lambs are laid in baskets and decked out with ribbons and flowers, which serve the better to show off the whiteness of the fleece. They are placed on the

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altar, the tomb of St. Agnes, and the celebrant, attended by deacon and subdeacon, commences the blessing. The antiphon with which the ceremony opens, *Stans beata Agnes*, is sung in the choir, to the accompaniment of a harp. The prayers are then chanted, the lambs are sprinkled with holy water and incensed, and then are carried away to be presented to the Holy Father.

Their future home is amongst a community of nuns, whose duty it is to care for them until they are ready to be shorn of the wool that is to supply the *pallia*. The *pallium* is a stole-like band of white wool bearing four crosses. From earliest times it has been worn by the sovereign Pontiffs as an emblem of spiritual authority—a figure, as some writers tell us, of the Good Shepherd, bearing the sheep upon His shoulders. It is now worn by patriarchs and metropolitans as distinctive of their superiority in the episcopate. Before being presented by the Holy Father, the *pallium* is placed upon the tomb of St. Peter on the vigil of the feast of this saint, and is left there during the whole night, a suggestion that it is the jurisdiction of the Apostle which is perpetuated in the Catholic hierarchy.

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CHAPTER XV

THE CATACOMBS

'Fiducia Christianorum—resurrectio mortuorum.'

'The hope of the Christian is in the resurrection of the dead.'
TERTULLIAN.

Cardinal Wiseman's description of the Catacombs—General description of the Catacombs—Comparison with pagan sepulchres—Mystic signs in the Catacombs.

To give some idea of the Catacombs, those nurseries of early Christianity, I cannot do better than recall a paragraph in Cardinal Wiseman's 'Fabiola':

'A catacomb may be divided into three parts: its passages or streets, its chambers or squares, and its churches. The passages are long, narrow galleries cut with tolerable regularity, so that the roof and floor are at right angles with the sides, often so narrow as scarcely to admit two persons to go abreast. They sometimes run quite straight to a great length, but they are crossed by others so as to form a complete labyrinth or network of subterranean corridors. To be lost among them would easily be fatal. But these passages lead to something else. They are themselves the catacomb or the cemetery.

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Their walls, as well as the sides of the staircases, are honeycombed with graves—that is, with rows of excavations, large and small, with sufficient length to admit a human body, from a child to a full-grown man, laid with its side to the gallery. Sometimes there are as many as fourteen, sometimes as few as three or four of those rows one above the other.'

The Basilica of St. Agnes rises directly upon the Catacombs. The level of the floor was probably at one time a series of corridors with burial-places as now we find still lower down beneath the building. It has flowered into its present beauty from the very graves of the early Christians, just as the whole Church of Christ broke through the thick weight of paganism and superstition when watered by the blood of the martyrs.*

The entrance to the catacomb of St. Agnes is from the church. Passing through a narrow doorway, we descend at once a flight of rough steps, many of them formed of slabs of stone or slate which at one time served to seal a grave or to form a bench, or some other object required there.

No sooner do we stand within one of the passages of this city of the dead than all around seems to inspire us with a feeling of closeness to that age and life in which these galleries found so important a part. An intense interest urges us to go forward, to proceed and learn more of those times of faith and of love. Before surveying closely the catacombs of St. Agnes, we may gather together some general ideas of the subterranean cemeteries of Rome.

* Tertullian.

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We may say at the outset that it is erroneous to regard the Roman Catacombs merely as hiding-places, which the Christians excavated in order to carry out the ceremonies of their proscribed religion, and in which to remove their dead from the insults of persecutors. The Roman law enforced the deepest respect for the tomb. Under this law societies, fraternities, guilds, were enabled to hold cemeteries for burying the members, and it has been shown that the Christians had thus at an early period become recognised in so far as to be capable of possessing their places of sepulture.* In the excavation of the galleries the faithful evidently followed a plan which would admit of their being used for reunions and for the observance of liturgical services.

The Christian catacombs in many instances originated from private family burying-grounds. The more wealthy of the community would allow others of the faithful to be interred in their cemetery, or in some cases probably presented the whole to the Pope, and thence they became the common property of the Church.

The Catacombs extend on all sides outside the city. Stretching away, as they do, for many miles in winding and maze-like passages, it may well be imagined what an immense number had been laid to rest in the underground cemetery during the ages of

* Under what title the Church was allowed to possess is not clearly shown. De Rossi suggests as a *collegium funeraticium* (burying guild). Mgr. Duchesne thinks the faculty was given in the term of peace under the Emperor Commodus (*vide* Marucchi: 'Elém. d'Archéologie,' vol. i., p. 117).

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persecution. To form an estimate of their numbers it must also be remembered that the galleries are, in many instances, three, one over the other, and several bodies were entombed in the height of each wall. The corridors are narrow, and the roof vaulted, and still showing the marks of the tool which had hollowed out the *tufo* or rock. On either side the graves (*loculi*) are opened up in the wall, one over the other like the shelves of a cupboard. The corpse being placed in its tomb, the opening was sealed over with a slab of marble, stone or slate, and firmly cemented in so that it became hermetically closed.

On the slab, or, in some cases, in the unset cement, was chiselled or scratched the name of the deceased. A word or simple phrase often reveals to us the emotion of the parent, husband or wife of the one there laid to rest. Sometimes that phrase is the expression of hope, of resignation, the commendation of the soul to God, or the appeal for aid.*

Only a word, a sign, says more to the Christian soul than those stately, princely sepulchres which were raised above the ashes of a Metella or a Scipio—those monuments which line the ancient Appian Way, which tell of glory past and gone, but suggest no thought of that which is beyond the grave.

The mausoleum of Cæsar, with its massive walls and sculptured marble, tells us of a pomp and show that are dead with him. The word, the emblem

* *Cf.* pagan custom of singing (*laudationes*) praises of the dead at the funeral, and then engraving these on the tomb. Pagans inscribed *Vale* (Farewell); Christians, *In pace;* or if they used the *Vale* they added *in* ☧ (Armellini, p. 137).

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upon the stone that closes the dust of the plebeian and the slave of the Catacombs bespeaks the faith that never dies, and strikes within the heart to-day a chord responding to that which vibrated centuries ago. As we proceed along the labyrinth of passages all speaks to us of peace, of virtue, of hope, of immortality. *In pace* (In peace) is the common legend upon the tomb—the peace which was won in the hard days of persecution and trial!

The dove, symbol of the soul, bears in its mouth the olive-branch, symbol of peace. No great deeds are recorded of the interred, but just the simple, touching notice that the man was most pious, most devout, the woman 'most sweet' and 'chaste.' The anchor of hope is frequent. The ivy-leaf expresses the immortal life into which death has led its victims.

It needs a visit to these treasure-houses of Catholic faith to realize the fascination which the Catacombs can exercise upon the attentive mind.

There, in the symbolic representations, we discover the first expressions of an immense range of Catholic dogma: the constitution and government of the Church, its liturgy, its doctrines, the prophecies and types of the Old Testament, with their fulfilment in the New, set forth with a simplicity and ingenuity (we may call it) which never fail to instruct and interest.

Here and there we meet with the larger tomb, the arcosolium, formed like an altar, and surmounted by an arch, usually decorated with paintings or tracings, so pregnant with the teachings of the early Church. Or, again, we step aside from the long, narrow gallery to find ourselves within a chapel-like chamber, with

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tombs on all sides, with columns cut out of the stone and with elegant vaulted ceiling. Such *cubicula* or chambers, in most cases, formed the family vaults of the more wealthy Christians ; not that any distinction was studied between the patrician and plebeian, for nowhere do we find so clear an antithesis to the Roman pride of birth and class as in the Catacombs.

These family sepulchres afford frequent instances of the freed slave or the adopted child being buried near the remains of the master.

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CHAPTER XVI

'AD STA MARTURA' (NEAR THE HOLY MARTYR)*

Some details of the catacomb of St. Agnes—Characteristic inscriptions—Alpha and Omega—The ship—Cubicula—The anchor—Signum Christi—The fish—The Holy Eucharist—The fossores—Representation of Saints Peter and Paul—Agnes Sanctissima.

We may now turn our closer attention to some few details of the catacomb of St. Agnes, where we shall find things of interest to illustrate what has already been said. This catacomb cannot be called the most important nor the largest. It is not as rich in archæological treasures as that of St. Callixtus, which enclosed the tomb of St. Cecilia and several of the martyred Bishops of Rome, but it is remarkable and attractive as being one of the best preserved, as regards its general form and the details surrounding the tombs.

We enter, then, within a cemetery where lie the remains of well-nigh 6,000 bodies, the greater number of which lived in the early days of persecution. It is computed that 860 of the tombs have never been

* This expression is found in an inscription of the catacomb of St. Agnes (Armellini, p. 67).

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opened.* On the steps by which we descend our attention is called to two inscriptions. The one is in Greek characters, very rudely engraved, and is a prayer to the deceased to remember in her prayers those left behind: 'Felicitas' 'Be mindful' [of us]. The other is merely the indication of the name of a child, but in the characteristic manner of the Catacombs: 'Epaphrodito dulcissimo' ('To the most sweet [or gentle] Epaphroditus').

At the foot of the steps by which we have descended we find ourselves perhaps fifty or sixty feet below the surface in a gallery of *loculi* or tombs, some of which are still closed, some opened and disclosing the remains of human beings of perhaps eighteen centuries ago. In one nothing remains but the skull, in another a skeleton almost complete; or, again, two are found in the same grave, and we are told that husband and wife or mother and child were laid there side by side. Here the distinct form of a skeleton is traced in thin lines of dust, or there a few bones, half wasted away, are tumbled in a heap together. Though such sights afford much food for reflection, we pass on quickly to notice other objects of interest and instruction.

As we proceed through the gallery we meet with a fragment of a slab of marble, undoubtedly once closing a tomb, and on it we discover a rude scratching representing a female figure with arms extended, surrounded with a garland of verdure, and on either side of the head the Greek letters A Ω, Alpha and Omega. It is an example of the *orante*, or person in

* Armellini, 'Il cim. di S. Ag.,' pp. 84, 360.

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prayer, which is so frequent in early Christian symbolism. What is its meaning? It is the picture of the soul of the deceased in prayer before Christ, who as God is the Alpha and Omega (Beginning and End)*

The extending of the hands, which, even in the Old Testament, expressed the attitude of prayer, had yet a fuller meaning for the Christian. 'Therefore do we pray with hands uplifted,' says St. Maximus of Turin, 'that even by our attitude in prayer we may confess the passion of our Lord.'†

A similar fragment presents another piece of symbolism. A ship is represented with widespread sails, surmounted by a cross without other explanation. But the allegory of the ship or boat was familiar to all the Christians. To the Gentile as well as to the follower of Christ the boat upon the waters served as an apt figure of the vicissitudes of human life, but in the Catacombs it receives a more particular meaning, and represents the Church of Christ, the barque of Peter.

Two very remarkable examples of the *cubicula* or burying chambers are to be seen in our way through the catacomb. They are very similar in detail. The large tomb, with its broad marble covering opposite the doorway, the vaulted roof and pillars cut out of the natural rock, suggest at once that the chamber was intended for liturgical as well as for sepulchral purposes. In fact, archæologists are now agreed that the sacred mysteries actually were performed in these

* Apocalypse xxii. 13.

† Serm. 56 de Cruce.

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subterranean chapels. A large and elegant tombstone in one of these chapels is worthy of note.

It tells us that there was buried *Favor* the *Lector*. And between the name and the title Lector, which designates his rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, is engraved an anchor, the symbol of hope (Heb. vi. 19).

From this hope, which was the anchor of safety and constancy to the Christian, many of the faithful received their name, bearing it sometimes in the Latin form Spes,* or the Greek Elpids, Elpidius, etc.

The anchor at the same time was to the Christian a reminder of the cross. This sacred symbol was but rarely represented openly, lest it should be exposed to ridicule and derision, but at every turn we find it in less obtrusive forms. The latest monuments of the end of the third century very commonly bear the symbol formed by the two Greek letters X and P, expressing at once the name of Christ and the cross, and known as the *Signum Xti*† (the sign of Christ).

It is well known that the early Christians were fond of the symbol of the fish to express ideas relating to the Redeemer, and the chief reason of this was on account of the acrostic to which the letters forming the Greek word ιχθυς lend themselves. Ιησους χριστος θεοῦ Υιος Σωτηρ (Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Saviour).

It has been suggested‡ that the symbol may have originated from the passage of St. Matthew's Gospel (iv. 19): 'Come ye after Me, and I will make you to be *fishers* of men.'

* See *Martyrology*, August 1, and March 28.

† Armellini, p. 160.

‡ Bishop Ellicott, commentary on text quoted.

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'Thesea is the troubled and evil world (Isaias lvii. 20), and the souls of men are the fish that have to be caught and taken from it, and the net is the Church of Christ.

'The earliest extant hymn of the Church by Clement of Alexandria dwells on the image with a rich and suggestive playfulness. Christ is thus addressed:

'Fisher of men, thou blest,
Out of the world's unrest,
Out of sin's troubled sea,
Taking us, Lord, to Thee;
Out of the waves of strife,
With bait of blissful life,
Drawing Thy nets to shore
With choicest *fish* good store.'*

The fish, therefore, conveyed to the mind the resemblance of the Divine Master,† and particularly in reference to the Holy Eucharist. A fragment of stone in the catacomb of St. Agnes illustrates this very clearly; in fact, there is scarcely another example known which is more expressive of this point of Christian symbolism. A small fish is represented with half-open mouth about to feed upon a round form of bread which is marked with a cross. Immediately beneath the bread appears the monogram spoken of above, ☧, evidently in explanation that the bread represents the sacramental species of the Holy Eucharist.

* Quoted by Bishop Ellicott.

† The idea is expressed in a Greek inscription of the catacomb of St. Callixtus: 'The Fish, Saviour of the shipwrecked' ('Rom. Sott. T. I.,' p. 288).

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In the light of this explanation it is easy to understand the curious expression of the early Christian writer: 'Nos pisciculi secundum IXΘTN nostrum Jesum Christum' * ('We are little fish according to the Fish, Jesus Christ')—that is, as the followers of the Divine Master are called Christians after His name—Christ, so, by following out His own ordinance and feeding upon His flesh and blood, they become like to Him and intimately united with Him.

Our Divine Lord, in promising this great Sacrament, had declared it to be the pledge of eternal life,† and this explains to us why the faithful so frequently used this symbol on their sepulchral monuments. It may also have been designed to recall that the deceased had been fortified with this Sacrament.‡ In whichever light we view these curious but significant representations, they are an indication of that faith which has remained unaltered to our own day.

We may next take notice of a very rough but clear drawing upon a slab of marble of a *fossor*, or excavator, of the catacombs. He is represented in the act of digging with a pickaxe, the earth as it falls away being gathered in a sort of basket. He wears a long braided tunic, upon the hem of which are several small crosses. In the times of persecutions the *fossores* held an important office amongst the faithful; in fact, they seem to have been very little below the minor clergy, and they are sometimes called explicitly *clerics*, who received a kind of ordination from the Bishops. They must, therefore, have formed a kind of confraternity. The

* Tertullian de Baptismo. † St. John vi.

‡ Armellini, p. 204.

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work of the *fossores* was certainly such as would not be entrusted except to those who would show the greatest veneration and piety. Besides preparing the place of burial, they often received in charge the corpse which was to be prepared for interment by being wrapped in linen and sprinkled with aromatic spices, this being done, no doubt, in imitation of the burial of Christ Himself.

As we proceed along the catacomb, the narrow, winding passages, we see frequently recurring the easily-interpreted figure of the dove with the monogram of Christ. It tells us of the belief that the pure soul has taken its flight to its Saviour; or, again, the dove drinking at a fountain or from a vessel reminds us of the 'living waters,' which for ever satiate all the thirst and longing of the soul.

It is worthy of note that in the cemetery of St. Agnes was discovered a painting upon glass, very much injured, but yet sufficiently intelligible to the archæologist to portray the heads of St. Peter and St. Paul.

In one of the larger spaces of these catacombs has been formed a kind of museum of smaller objects which were unearthed in restoring and reopening the passages after their abandonment for so many centuries. We see there in great numbers little oil-lamps, usually of stone, vases of various forms in which, in some cases, the blood of the martyrs was preserved, and in others the spices and perfumes were contained, which were in such general use. Then there are ornaments of every kind, which were placed as distinguishing marks on the graves: rings, dice, ivory pendants, styles (used to write upon wax

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tablets), buttons, pieces of glass, children's dolls, and other objects, all of which excite curiosity at their existence in that underground cemetery, but tell us but little of those by whom they were carried there.

I conclude this chapter with a mention of an inscription which, more than all else, connects the Catacomb with the story of St. Agnes. It is a sepulchral marble (*palombino*), upon which is engraved this short but very significant legend:

AGNE SANC
TISSIMA.*

It was the first record of the life and martyrdom of the Saint whose story we have traced, and this simple, brief record conveyed not a little meaning, seeing that the title 'Sanctissima,' by no means a common one, implied, not merely the purity and chastity of the maiden during life, but also the glory of her victory. The saints (*sancti*) of the early Christians were pre-eminently the martyrs,† those who had lived the Christian life and who had died as its witnesses. 'Agnes Sanctissima' was, then, a martyr of eminence, most holy by the double title of a holy life and a glorious death.

* This is but a facsimile, the original being in the National Museum at Naples.

† The compiler of the 'Acts' uses the title, 'Diem festum Sanctissimæ virginis celebremus' (Armellini, p. 71).

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CHAPTER XVII

GENERAL DEVOTION TO ST. AGNES

St. Jerome—St. Damasus—Pope Liberius—Pius IX.—St. Martin of Tours—St. Bridget—St. Ambrose—St. Thomas Aquinas—Thomas à Kempis—Devotion in England—St. Aldhelm—Venerable Bede—Various ancient customs—A non-Catholic testimony.

'The life of St Agnes is crowned with praise in the language and writings of all nations, and especially throughout the churches.' Thus was St. Jerome able to write of the young Roman martyr. Her pure and modest life, her severe trial and cruel death, seem to have arrested the attention of the whole world, and the praise and veneration of her name handed down as glory to stimulate the lawful pride of the Christian in his faith, as an incentive to imitate the lessons of her life.*

In this chapter we propose to speak of some of

* She has been raised to the honour of the altar, and at every celebration of the Divine mysteries in the Canon of the Mass her name is mentioned. 'Also to us sinners,' the priest says, 'Thy servants, confiding in the multitude of Thy mercies, vouchsafe to grant some part and fellowship with . . . Agnes . . . and with all Thy saints.'

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those marks of this devotion standing out in history as monuments to the name and memory of Agnes.

Away back through the centuries we find the pious and tender-hearted Pope Damasus, giving one great sanctioning example of trust in the intercession of Agnes when he wrote for the world the epitaph which even now arrests the gaze of the pilgrim to Rome. In English it reads as follows:

'Tradition attests that our pious ancestors have related how, at the dreadful sound of the trumpet signal, (announcing an outburst of persecution) Agnes, still a child, was at once prepared to leave the embrace of her guardian. Valiantly and willingly she would trample underfoot the cruel threats and the rage of the tyrant, who would deliver her pure body to the flames. With the strength of a child she surmounted the intensity of fear. Stripped of her garments, her hair by miraculous profusion covered her as a new vesture, that human eyes might not gaze upon that temple of the Lord. O Thou, the object of my veneration, holy and glorious example of purity, illustrious martyr, I beseech thee, hear with favour the prayers of Damasus.'

'Fama refert sanctos dudum retulisse parentes
Agnem cum lugubres cantus tuba concrepuisset
Nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam,
Sponte truces calcasse minas rabiemque tyranni
Urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus,
Viribus immensum parvis superasse timorem,
Nudaque profusum crinem per membra dedisse
Ne Domini templum facies peritura videret.
O veneranda mihi, sanctum decus, alma pudoris
Ut Damasi precibus faveas precor inclyta Martyr.'

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Previous to the time of Damasus we have record of the devotion of another Pontiff to the memory of Agnes. Pope Liberius was one of the victims of that storm of persecution which was aroused in the fourth century by the arch-heretic Arius. The holy patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius, one of the staunchest opposers of the Arian errors, had been deposed, calumniated with the blackest of charges, sent into exile, and hunted like a criminal. The Emperor Constantius sought the Pope's sanction for this ill-treatment of the saintly Bishop. But Liberius was not duped by the hypocrisy of the Arian messengers, nor bribed by the imperial gifts and his answer was a condemnation of Arianism and all its supporters. This brought violence upon the Pope himself, and before long he was taken prisoner and sent off into Thrace as an exile, whilst his See was filled by an Antipope, more condescending to the imperial wishes. For three years the enemies of the Church held violent sway, and then Constantius found himself constrained to decree the return of the lawful Bishop of Rome. Liberius was about to enter the city in triumph when he heard that the Antipope was yet lingering in Rome, still with the hope of retaining his position. The Pope well knew that a fresh outbreak of hostility, perhaps even to bloodshed, was likely if he appeared, and so, with a desire of peace, he retired to the villa on the Nomentan Way which once had been the abode of Agnes, and there, by the tomb of the virgin-martyr, where the faithful were accustomed to seek the protection of Agnes, Liberius joined in the prayers of the pilgrims for peace upon

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the Church through the merits and intercession of the patroness of their native city.

It would take long, and perhaps it would not be interesting, to record the names of all those Popes who have shown their devotion by restoring, beautifying, and enriching the tomb and basilica of our Saint.*

But we must not pass over without special mention the name of one other Pope who cherished a singular feeling of tenderness towards St. Agnes. This was Pius IX. Very frequent were the visits which this Pontiff paid to the tomb of St. Agnes, and many are the souvenirs of the Pope's devotion to the Saint.

On one occasion when a considerable assemblage had gathered around the Holy Father at the Nomentan Basilica the floor of the room in which they were gave way and precipitated the Pope with several of his attendants into a cellar beneath. The fall was a dangerous one, and might have caused considerable injury, but no one sustained even the smallest hurt. Pius IX. always attributed the escape to the protection of St. Agnes, and in remembrance of the occasion had a large painting representing the fall placed in the cortile leading to the church. In the higher part of the painting St. Agnes is represented in prayer.

Many of the great saints have had so particular

* It was a time-honoured custom for the Popes, accompanied by clergy and laity, to pay a special visit to the tomb of the Saint each year on her feast-day, and several are known to have discoursed here in praise of the Saint, St. Gregory the Great amongst the number (Santini, 'Vita di S. Agnese,' p. 145).

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a devotion to St. Agnes as to have this trait of their lives specially mentioned. St. Martin of Tours, we are told, was favoured with frequent apparitions of the holy virgin. St. Bridget is recorded to have received particular favours in the same way, and often to have been consoled in difficulties by this patroness. St. Gertrude also entertained a particular feeling of devotion towards our Saint.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, contemporary of St. Damasus, has left a charming encomium of the Martyr in his treatise 'De Virginibus.' He was writing to his sister Marcellina, who had consecrated her virginity to God, and his object seems to be to show what a glorious example is to be found in Agnes for every state of life. 'This is the natal day of holy Agnes,' he exclaims. 'She is an object of wonderment to the strong man; an object of encouragement to the weak child; the married may consider her with admiration; the unmarried may imitate her virtues.'

A beautiful hymn ('Agnes beatæ Virginis') containing in verse many of the thoughts and expressions of St. Ambrose's praise of St. Agnes may be from the pen of this holy Bishop. One of the greatest of Christian poets, Marcus Aurelius Prudentius, has found in the martyrdom of St. Agnes the inspiration which dictated one of his noblest hymns.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelical doctor, was never without a relic of St. Agnes. While travelling once from Rome to Naples, his companion was struck with a malignant fever, of which the medical attendants had little hope of relieving him. St. Thomas placed the relic of his patroness upon the sick man,

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and both had recourse to her intercession, when the recovery which had been despaired of was speedily effected.

Everyone knows the intense piety and spirituality which animated the writer of the 'Imitation of Christ,' the venerable Thomas à Kempis. This Canon Regular of the Windesheim Congregation was a constant client of Agnes. Amongst his writings we find in her praise two discourses (26th and 27th), several hymns, an acrostic, and also a prayer full of his wonted piety.* He also records seven miracles wrought at the intercession of the Saint, and calls them *examples* —*i.e.*, manifestations of her heavenly power. Our Saint was patroness of the monastery of Mount St. Agnes, in which Thomas lived.† We read in this saintly man's life: ‡ 'It was with great joy that he and his brother religious received, in A.D. 1461, a chest in which some relics of St. Agnes had been preserved for 350 years.' These relics consisted most probably of a part of her skull, for the rest of the remains had never been removed from her tomb in the Nomentan Basilica. In the first of the 'examples' of which we have just been speaking Thomas tells a story of one of the brethren who was subject to frequent headaches, and who was on that account frequently obliged to absent himself from choir. 'But he had a special devotion to the venerable

* The prayer is given on page 130.

† St. Agnes is a special patron of the novitiate among the Canons Regular, and she was chosen as special patron of the discalced Trinitarians from the very foundation of this order.

‡ 'Life of the Venerable Thomas à Kempis,' by Dom Vincent Scully, C R.L.

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virgin St. Agnes, our patroness, who is so rich in tender compassion. He desired, therefore, with great longing to visit her sacred relics in Utrecht, which are honourably preserved there in a silver casket, covered with gold, in the Cathedral Church of St. Martin. And it so happened that he went with his Prior to visit that holy place, and, entering the cathedral, which is richly adorned with the relics of many saints, he begged the custodian to show him the reliquary of blessed Agnes, which he had so long devoutly wished to see. Then the custodian of the holy relics replied: 'It is difficult for me to obtain permission to open the precious casket of St. Agnes, but I will willingly show you the ancient reliquary of the holy virgin, in which her relics long reposed, to the praise and glory of God.' On hearing this the brother was filled with consolation, and awaited in joyous expectancy to see the venerable casket, and when he had seen it, and it had been opened, reverently bowing and kissing the chest, he placed his head within it, confidently expecting to obtain relief from his sufferings through the merits of St. Agnes. After this he returned most fervent, thanks to God and the holy virgin Agnes, that he had been permitted to behold these things with his own eyes; and henceforth from this time not only was his body freed from its former malady, but his soul received the grace of greater devotion, and he terminated well the course of his life by a joyous and happy death in great fervour of spirit.'*

'In this incident we find mention of two reliquaries

* 'Serm. ad Novit. Pars tertia,' viii., *n.* 19.

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of St. Agnes, a precious casket of silver and gold, and an ancient coffer in which the relics had formerly rested. It was this latter that was presented to the Priory of Agentenberg A.D. 1461.

Thomas describes the happy event in the twenty-eighth chapter of his chronicle. He tells us that as far back as A.D. 1413 the Dean of St. Martin's had transferred the relics of the youthful martyr from the ancient wooden chest, bound with plates of brass and gold, in which they had lain for so many years, into a new and beautifully wrought ark of silver overlaid with gold. But the good Canons on the Mount possessed no relics of the patroness to whom they were so devout, nor was it an easy matter to obtain such a treasure. Perhaps, however, the Chapter of the Cathedral at Utrecht would bestow upon them at least that ancient reliquary, which was sanctified by the presence of her holy remains for more than three centuries.

They presented their petition accordingly, and after a long delay, and after many friends had employed their influence in the matter, to the great joy of the whole community their humble request was granted. Two of the brethren—'consecrated priests,' Thomas remarks, 'to note their veneration for the holy reliquary'—were sent to Utrecht, and after a few days they returned with the coveted treasure. Hearing this, our brethren and all our lay domestics rejoiced exceedingly. And with great devotion and reverence the ark was carried to the church and placed in the sanctuary near the high altar, under the arch of the north wall.'*

* 'Chron. Mt. Stæ. Agnetis,' pp. 123, 125.

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As the veneration paid to St. Agnes was so general, we must needs expect to find some trace of it in our own country. Foremost amongst these signs of devotion we must mention the writings on St. Agnes left by St. Aldhelm, the first Bishop of Sherborne, and Venerable Bede. The former has taken occasion to speak of the glories of St. Agnes in two separate treatises—one in prose, the other in verse—wherein he shows forth the merit and lustre of virginity.

Venerable Bede has mentioned her in his Martyrology, and has also left us a graceful Latin hymn in her praise.*

The Synod of Worcester (A.D. 1240), under Walter Cantilupe, ordained that January 21, the feast of St. Agnes (as also the feasts of SS. Margaret, Lucy and Agatha), should be observed as a holiday of obligation by women.†

A proof that the devotion of St. Agnes had at one time held deep root amongst the people of England may be found in the fact that her name was connected with popular customs and traditions. I give a few examples.‡ In 'Poor Robin's Almanack for 1734' mention is made of a practice called 'Fasting St. Agnes' Feast':

* See Mgr. Bartolini, 'Acta Stæ. Agnetis.'

† It was a holiday of obligation in other places. A Venetian calendar of the eleventh century, in the library of San Salvatore of Bologna, speaks of the feast: 'Passio Agnetis Virginis ab op' (immune). See Armellini, p. 36.

‡ Collected by the Right Rev. A. Allaria, C.R.L., Vid. *Child of Mary's Journal*, January, 1895.

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'St. Agnes' Day comes by-and-by,
When pretty maids do fast to try
Their sweethearts in their dreams to see,
Or know who shall their husbands be.'

In Durham the following invocation was used:

'Fair St. Agnes, play thy part,
And send to me my own sweetheart;
Nor in his best nor worst array,
But in the clothes he wears every day,
That to-morrow I may him ken
From among all other men.'

The following lines of Ben Jonson allude to the same custom:

'And on sweet Agnes' night,
Please you with promised sight;
Some of husbands, some of lovers,
Which an empty dream discovers.'

Another practice is mentioned by Aubrey in his 'Miscellanies,' p. 136, where he directs that 'upon St. Agnes's night you take a row of pins and pull out every one, one after another, saying a *Paternoster* sticking a pin in your sleeve, and you will dream of him or her you shall marry.'

The protection of St. Agnes was invoked against ague, as it would appear from a charm which was said to be efficacious when used on the eve of her feast.

The eldest female in the family was to say up the chimney:

'Tremble and go.
First day shiver and burn,
Tremble and quake;
Second day shiver and burn,
Tremble and die;
Third day never return.

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The popular ideas regarding St. Agnes have been beautifully treated by Keats in his 'St. Agnes's Eve.' Nor must we leave unmentioned that idyll of the same title by the poet Tennyson. In these verses the idea of her purity predominates for which Agnes has in all ages been held forth by poet and preacher as a most impressive pattern.

In London, besides the old well of St. Agnes, Aldersgate, there was a celebrated well called St. Agnes-le-Clair near Old Street Road. 'As recently as the early years of the present century,' says H. B. Wheatley in his 'London Past and Present,' 'the district south of Old Street, the Tabernacle Walk and Paul Street was known as St. Agnes-le-Clair Fields. The north side of Tabernacle Walk is still called St. Agnes Terrace, but St. Agnes Crescent and St. Agnes Street have disappeared or received other names.'

The village of St. Agnes in Cornwall was named after the Roman virgin-martyr, and the annual village fête-day is kept up on the Saint's feast, January 21.

Some of these customs are doubtless a sorry indication of the superstition which was very prevalent at one time, but they likewise give proof of the veneration which had once existed, and had been debased and degenerated by ignorance and false ideas.

The following extract from a Protestant writer, may serve as a fitting conclusion to this chapter, and a summary of all that has been said of devotion to the Saint: 'So ancient is the worship paid to St. Agnes that, next to the Evangelists and Apostles, there is no saint whose effigy is older. It is found on the ancient

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glass and earthenware vessels used by the Christians in the early part of the third (?) century with her name inscribed, which leaves no doubt of her identity. . . . As patroness of maidenhood she is represented as offering a nun to the Madonna as in a lovely picture by Paul Veronese. . . . Her tender sex, her almost childish years (for she was not yet thirteen years old), her beauty, innocence, and heroic defence of her chastity, the high antiquity of the veneration paid to her, have all combined to invest the person and character of St. Agnes with a charm, an interest, a reality to which the most sceptical are not wholly insensible.' (Mrs. Jameson, 'Sacred and Legendary Art,' vol. ii., p. 600).

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APPENDIX A

PIOUS UNION OF THE CHILDREN OF MARY, UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF MARY IMMACULATE AND ST. AGNES

ACCORDING to the Rev. J. Hilgers, S.J., who has abridged Father Beringer's classic work on 'Indulgences' this association is exclusively intended for girls and young women. Only Children of Mary, or aspirants to that title, can be members of it. The Pious Union, to give it its official name, is precisely the Arch-Sodality of the Children of Mary belonging to the devout female sex.

The association in its present form owes its inception to Abbot Passeri, Canon Regular of the Lateran. In substance it is only a revival in modern days of a very ancient, if not the very first, sodality of the Blessed Virgin. In the eleventh, or, rather, at the opening of the twelfth century, a member of the Canonical Order, Blessed Peter de Honestis, established the Confraternity of the Sons and Daughters of Mary. The holy founder desired to propagate devotion to the Mother of God under the title of the Madonna Greca, whose image had been miraculously brought from Constantinople to Ravenna. A large and faithful copy of this picture may be seen in the London house of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, Stroud Green. To belong to this sodality was considered a great privilege in the Middle Ages. Popes, Cardinals, and other Prelates, Emperors and Empresses, Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, vied with each other in eagerly seeking the honourable title of Child of Mary. The first lady of distinction to be enrolled was the Countess Matilda of Canossa, who was suddenly and completely delivered from a dangerous illness on recommending herself to the

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Madonna Greca. In the year 1306 the number of women registered on the rolls was 300,000, a total far exceeded by that of the male members.

Another Canon Regular, St. Peter Fourier, canonized in 1897, having much at heart the spiritual welfare of poor girls, established exclusively for their benefit a Sodality of Mary Immaculate, and when afterwards he founded his Order of Notre Dame, now represented at Westgate and at Hull, he directed the Canonesses to carry on the same work, and in every school to start a Children of Mary's Sodality for girls.

Hence, when Abbot Passeri, in 1864, established his Sodality of Mary Immaculate in the parish church of St. Agnes-without-the-Walls, and afterwards, in 1866 and in 1870, obtained for this sodality from the reigning Pontiff, Pius IX., the rank of Primaria, or Arch-Sodality, with right to affiliate similar associations of the Children of Mary, it was only natural that the humble founder should consider he was simply following in the footsteps of holy and glorious predecessors in the Canonical Order.

By making St. Agnes the secondary patroness, and her shrine the very centre of the Arch-Sodality, Abbot Passeri hoped to infuse more thoroughly into its members those virtues of modesty and courage which so eminently befit the Child of Mary for the world. The example of a girl could not fail, he considered, to have a deep influence on girls, and the victory which St. Agnes won would encourage and stimulate those youthful members of her sex who to-day are compelled to cross streams of indecency flowing from so many pictorial and literary publications. Sacrifices for one's faith would be easier to make with the help of the example and prayers of the Christian martyr, St. Agnes. The hopes of Abbot Passeri were realized. His Sodality for the Children of Mary became widely known, not only in Rome, the theatre of the maiden's glorious fight, but throughout Italy. Leo XIII., then Archbishop of Perugia, recommended the Pious Union to all the young maidens in his diocese. The work spread, and to-day St. Agnes is honoured by Children of Mary in every land, from Great Britain to distant South America. Her beautiful medal, in which she is seen

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presenting the Children of Mary to the Immaculate Mother of God, is adopted as their proudest badge by thousands of sodalities affiliated to the parent society. 'The right of affiliation,' says F. Hilgers, was 'transferred in 1870 to the Abbot-General of the Canons Regular of the Lateran residing at the Church of St. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.'

APPENDIX B

HYMN TO ST. AGNES FROM ADAM OF ST. VICTOR, CANON REGULAR OF ST. AUGUSTINE

To life's strife, our heart renewing,
Let us gird ourselves, reviewing
How the maid the victory won.
Flower Divine! whose scents most precious,
As we touch its leaves refresh us
Till the battle fray is done.

Fair and wise and well descended,
Agnes, twice six summers ended,
Entered on her thirteenth year.
Her the Prefect's son beholding
Seeks a tale of love unfolding
Which Christ's bride disdains to hear.

Wonderful power of faith,
Wonderful chastity,
Wonderful heart beneath
Maidenly constancy.
So doth the mighty Lord,
By His most wondrous will,
Strength to the weak accord,
And with Himself fulfil.

Sick and sad the baffled lover
Lies; the Prefect's eyes discover
Whence his pain; the maid is brought.
Vain the gifts the vain man proffers,
Vile are all his richest offers,
In the faithful virgin's thought.

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APPENDIX C

I QUOTE from Rev. F. C. Husenbeth * the following modes of representing St. Agnes :

Sword in her hand	Private possession; formerly on rood-screen of St. James's, Norwich.
Sword in hand, lamb at her feet...	Denton, church chest.
Sword in her throat, lamb in her hand	North Elmham, rood-screen.
Sword in her hand, lamb on a book	Taverham, font.
Lamb on a book	Liber Cronicarum, Nuremburgæ, 1493.
Lamb led by a cord	Tableau de la Croix, Paris (F. Mazot, 1651).
Lamb on a book, short cross	Ramworth, North Parclose.
Sword in her throat, lamb leaping up to her	Westhall, rood-screen; Eye, rood-screen.
Seated, lamb at her feet, dove bringing a ring ...	Cawston, mural painting.
Sword and flames at her feet	Rome, St. Agnese-outside the-Walls.
Lamb and palm	Il Giottino.
Dagger and palm	Vienna, P. Veronese.
On a pile of wood	Ikonographie der Heiligen, 1834.
An angel covering her with a garment	Gillingham, church-window.
Angels covering her with her hair...	Die Attribute der Heiligen, Hanover, 1843.
Lamb at her feet	No reference.

* 'Emblems of Saints by which they are distinguished in Works of Art.'

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The same author has collected 'quaint and puzzling' variations in the Saint's names. He tells us that in England the name of 'Agnes' was sometimes written 'Anneys' and 'Angnes'; to which may be added the occasional designation of the village of St. Agnes in Cornwall as *St. Tann's*.

THE END

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