

*Then I heard every living creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, "To the one who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!"*

--Revelation 5:13

It's a story for our time as well as every other time: Agnes of God. She was a beautiful young teenager who came of age just when a wicked emperor had banned all things Christian: no gathering for worship, no Christian funerals, no visiting the sick, no public prayers, no offerings of social charity in the name of Christ. Older, wiser, Christians in later ages have written of Agnes that perhaps she did not understand the risks when she continued all these acts of faith and devotion "because of her tender years." Others may be closer to the truth: "Agnes overcame both her tender years and the tyrant and won the crown of glory."

No doubt there were many beautiful young noblewomen in Rome in 304 A.D., but only Agnes mattered to the governor's son. His burning love did not kindle an equal passion in Agnes, however, but rather another love that the young man did not want or appreciate. When Procop proposed marriage, she replied that she had devoted herself to the Lord Jesus. *"I am already promised to the Lord of the Universe. He is more splendid than the sun and the stars, and He has said He will never leave me!"* Procop turned her in. She was dragged through the streets to a mock trial. Older and wiser voices begged that she give herself to the marriage and save herself. With the same love that had answered Procop she received their good intentions and replied: *"He chose me first and He shall have me."* Angels protected her when she was imprisoned with the foulest criminals, and even the flames meant to torture her bent away from her body. When the executioner dealt the death blow, a host of Christian girls flooded out of the seats of the Agonium and soaked up her blood from the sand with handkerchiefs to heal the poor.

In 1947, when yet another wicked emperor who hated all Christians had been overthrown and the story of the persecuted Church began emerging from those lands, Luther D. Reed wrote: "The early Christians risked their lives to assemble for common worship. Throughout the centuries since, the Church has lifted up its voice in unending song, and we may well believe that today without common worship the Church in any given community would inevitably perish." (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, 3.) Today as every belief is challenged by the claims of so many other beliefs and our identity as baptised children of God dissipates in our vast networks of techno-relationships, we need common worship more than ever. Reed again: "Distinctions fall away in the House of God... [all people] are of equal stature and gain common strength as they unite in a common service which has greater scale and significance than the private devotions of any in the group could attain." Public worship is the Church's most powerful witness to the world. "As the planets go around the sun, so the congregation in its services, full of loveliness and dignity, moves about her Lord... confession has no lovelier form than when it is engaged in adoration and praise."

Agnes was who she was and did what she did because she worshipped Jesus in a common assembly that "exalts Christ as the One who loved us and saved us from our sins and to whom glory and dominion are due." We too need worship in the common assembly to be who we are as children of God and do what we must do to witness to our Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. Blessings on St. Agnes' Day!