

To *Christ* Alone  
I Give My Undivided Love

**Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr  
Patroness of the Diocese of Rockville Centre**

A Pastoral Letter from the Most Reverend John O. Barres, Bishop of Rockville Centre  
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre

January 21, 2024



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# *To Christ Alone I Give My Undivided Love*

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*“For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” 2 Corinthians 5:14-15*

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

On January 21, 304, in the heart of Rome, a young girl named Agnes was put to death in Domitian’s Stadium, now known as Piazza Navona. She was killed for refusing to marry the son of Rome’s city prefect, an important government official. Agnes certainly understood the gravity of her refusal, for such a marriage would have guaranteed for her a prominent place in Roman society. Agnes’s decision by itself would have been enough to startle her contemporaries, but it was the reason for her refusal that proved most perplexing of all: the young woman desired to conform herself entirely to Christ as a consecrated virgin. This carried a grave risk, for Agnes lived in an age when Christians were persecuted intensely by the Roman Empire.

Such radical love and conformity to the Lord Jesus astonished the Roman authorities who could not think of a higher love than the Empire. But nothing could prevent Agnes from surrendering all of her love to the Lord Jesus, neither the offer of marriage to a prominent political heir, nor the risk of torture and death. “I am espoused to Him whom the angels serve,” tradition records Agnes as saying, the “sun and moon stand in wonder at his beauty.”<sup>1</sup> How can we explain such love, such courage, such strength in a girl so young? How can we explain such heroism apart from grace alive and at work in the heart of Agnes, permeating her life with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and drawing her ever closer to the Heart of Christ.

In this pastoral letter, which marks the 1,720th anniversary of St. Agnes’s martyrdom, I wish to renew our love and devotion to our Diocesan Patroness and present her once again to the faithful of Long Island as a model of holiness and mission. I echo the sentiments of my predecessor, Bishop William Murphy, whose words to the young people of our diocese twenty years ago remain ever-relevant:

Saint Agnes...showed by her life and her death that solidarity of human love transformed by God’s own love. She was the witness who changed the hearts of so many in her own time and throughout the seventeen hundred years since her martyrdom. She



is your patroness and protectress. Look to her. Be inspired by her. Seek her help and she will be there to strengthen your commitment to being witnesses today of God's love as salt of the earth and light of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Agnes holds a unique place not only in our local Church of Rockville Centre, but throughout the universal Church as well. She remains one of the few saints inscribed within the Canon (First Eucharistic Prayer) of the Mass and has been praised by saints and mystics over the centuries. To this day, the two principal sites dedicated to her life and martyrdom, the Basilica of St. Agnes Outside-the-Walls and the Church of St. Agnes in Agone in Piazza Navona, continue to attract thousands of pilgrims, archeologists, and artists for their rich history and remarkably well-preserved Christian art. In learning more about the life of our patroness, we will also learn more about the rise and development of Christianity,



for Agnes's life reflects within itself the evangelical impulse of the early Church.

## I. Life and Martyrdom

Most of what is known about St. Agnes's life stems from two principal sources relating both directly and indirectly to St. Ambrose. The first and most authoritative text is Ambrose's well-known treatise, *On Virginity*, within which he presents St. Agnes as an exemplar of Christian chastity and virginity. St. Ambrose utilizes the occasion of St. Agnes's feast day as a springboard for his larger discussion of the distinctiveness of Christianity. It is from this text that the Church draws the liturgical reading for the Liturgy of the Hours on St. Agnes's feast day:

A new kind of martyrdom! Too young to be punished, yet old enough for a martyr's crown; unfitted for contest, yet effortless in victory, she shows herself a master in valor despite the handicap of her youth. As a bride she would not be hastening to join her husband with the same joy she shows as a virgin on her way to punishment, crowned not with flowers but with holiness of life, adorned not with braided hair but with Christ himself... You could see fear, in the eyes of the executioner, as if he were the one condemned, while she had no fear for herself. One victim, but a twin martyrdom, to modesty and to religion; Agnes preserved her virginity and gained the martyr's crown.<sup>3</sup>





St. Agnes, as we discover here within St. Ambrose’s treatise, emerged from the earliest centuries as an important illustration of youthful heroism, purity, and faith.

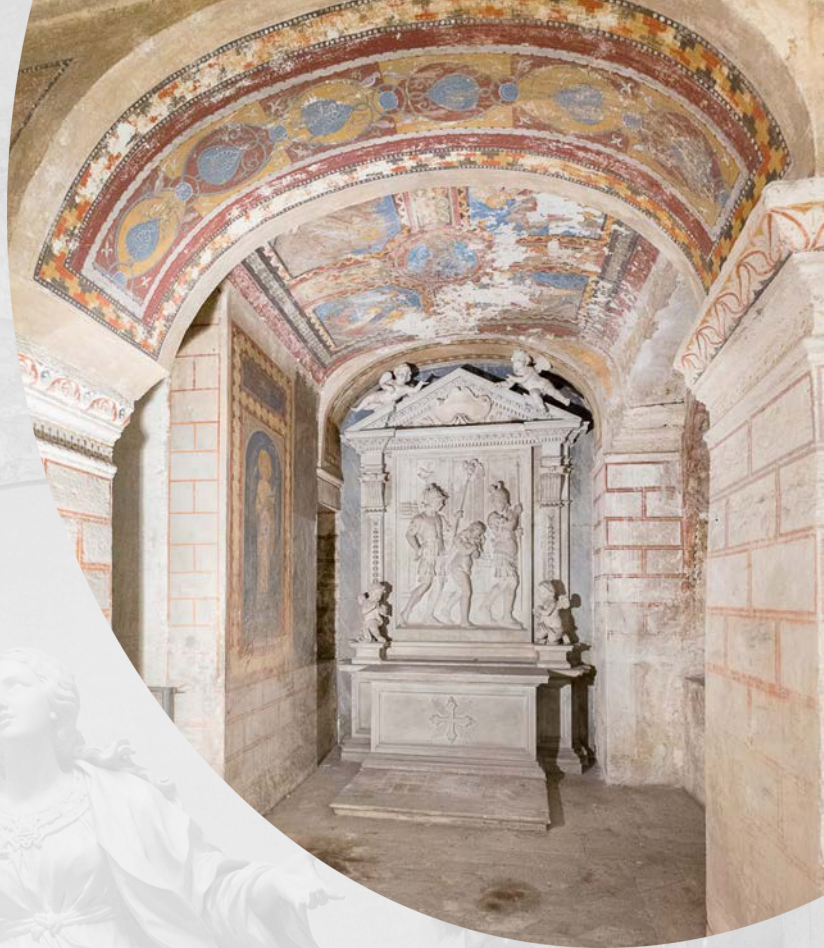
St. Ambrose’s text *On Virginit*y serves a pivotal role in the historical setting for St. Agnes, not only

for its hagiographical details, but even more so for the larger context in which it is framed. The life and martyrdom of Agnes, according to Ambrose, unearth the distinctiveness of Christianity within the ancient Roman world. Roman citizens, for example, would have been familiar with the so-called “vestal virgins” who surrendered married life for a minimum term of thirty years to serve in the temple of the goddess Vesta.<sup>4</sup> These women tended to the flame inside the temple and ensured that it remained burning day and night. Such a sacrificial act displayed civic loyalty, but Ambrose contrasts such virginal love with that of Agnes. He argues that for the Christian, virginal love is not reduced to a specific time frame, nor is such love reduced merely for the abstract political state. Rather, such love is given to God alone who reveals himself in the Person of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The other significant hagiographical source is the sixth-century text known as *The Passion of St. Agnes*.<sup>6</sup> This text offers key details about Agnes’s life and, although once attributed to St. Ambrose, scholars now conclude that the text emerged several centuries after Ambrose’s death. Although it was compiled after the deaths of Sts. Agnes and Ambrose, *The Passion of St. Agnes* nevertheless accurately



records the oral tradition that was handed down for centuries among the Christian faithful, a tradition in which Ambrose himself was immersed. From this text we learn of the young man Symphronius, the son of Rome's city prefect, who wishes to marry Agnes. The young Agnes refuses to accept his offer of marriage and is brought to trial before the man's father, Sempronius. It is within the exchange at her trial that we learn of Agnes's desire to remain a virgin and offer her life in total love for the Lord Jesus. The city prefect, Sempronius, responds by offering Agnes two options: to become a vestal virgin in service to the goddess Vesta or be thrown into prostitution. Agnes refuses both and is therefore condemned to death. Within this exchange we also hear of Agnes's love for Christ and her desire to unite her heart totally to Him. Such an act astounded



the Roman authorities, who could not understand why a young woman would choose to give her life for something other than marriage or the Empire. Agnes, however, displayed that radical love at the heart of the Christian life. In her actions she conformed herself to the bride in the Song of Songs, which allegorically teaches us about the relationship between each individual Christian and Christ: "Let me rise then and go about the city, through the streets and squares; Let me seek him whom my soul loves...I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go" (Song of Songs 3:2-4).

## II. Catholic Archeology

*The Passion of St. Agnes* most likely developed as a resource for the growing number of pilgrims to the saint's tomb within the Basilica of St. Agnes Outside-the-Walls along the *Via Nomentana*. This document provides a glimpse into the life of the early Church, for we discover already in the first centuries of Christianity the rise of pilgrimage to the tombs of the saints. Such pilgrim sites emerged around the tombs of the Apostles, most especially Sts. Peter and

Paul in Rome, as well as in Compostela, Spain, at the tomb of St. James the Greater. The intense interest and devotion to the site of St. Agnes's martyrdom in Piazza Navona and in the Basilica which holds her relics along the *Via Nomentana* teaches us that for the early Church, the martyrs were held up along with the Apostles as examples of holiness. *The Passion of St. Agnes* thus served as a "pilgrim's guide" to the large number of faithful who would travel long distances to venerate the saint's relics. This text was most likely utilized for reading in the Basilica of St. Agnes Outside-the-Walls. *The Passion of St. Agnes* also served a liturgical purpose as a homiletic aid to priests preaching to pilgrims within the Basilica.

The archeological sites associated with St. Agnes's martyrdom demonstrate a sustained interest and devotion to the saint well after the period of Christian persecution in Rome. Thus, *The Passion of St. Agnes* served an important role in reminding Christians that holiness remains possible even for those not called to suffer martyrdom. Agnes's life inspires generations of Christians not only for her

heroic act of martyrdom, but also through her purity of life and love for the Lord Jesus, virtues which all Christians can aspire toward. The total self-gift and conformity to Christ that the young Agnes displayed through her death in Piazza Navona can be lived by all the faithful through acts of conformity to Christ in daily moments of life, particularly in our witness to the Gospel in the public square and in our refusing to cooperate with structures of sin and evil in our contemporary society.<sup>7</sup>

To this day pilgrims can still visit the monumental complex along the *Via Nomentana* and pray before the saint's tomb. Archeologists continue to explore the vast catacombs that exist beneath the Basilica and which remain open to pilgrims. Each year on St. Agnes's feast day, January 21st, two lambs are brought into the Basilica, blessed, and then presented to the Pope. The wool from these two lambs is then taken and woven into palliums (woolen liturgical vestments worn around the neck) that are later given to new archbishops around the world as signs of their leadership and union with the Bishop of Rome. Because her Latin name *Agnus* means lamb, St. Agnes has always been associated with lambs in sacred art and architecture.

In Piazza Navona a magnificent church was built over the site of Agnes's martyrdom. The church, known as St. Agnes in Agone, was designed by the well-known architect Francesco Borromini. This stunning Baroque church stands along the Piazza and attracts thousands of visitors and pilgrims each year. In 1918, at the request of Pope St. Pius X, St. Agnes's skull was translated to a chapel within the church, where it is venerated to this day. Pope Benedict XVI once reflected upon the spiritual and theological significance St. Agnes's church in Piazza Navona with these words:

Still today, for anyone strolling in Piazza Navona, the Saint's statue, high up on the pediment of the Church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, reminds us that this City of ours is also founded on friendship with Christ and on the witness to his Gospel borne by many of his sons and daughters. The generous gift



of themselves to him and for the good of their brethren is a basic component of Rome's spiritual features.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years major archeological work took place in the crypt and cemetery beneath the church, uncovering precious Christian artwork as well as significant historical sites associated with St. Agnes's martyrdom, including the place of her torture and imprisonment. As with the archeological research done within the Basilica of St. Agnes Outside-the Walls, the project in Piazza Navona underscores the deep devotion of the Christian faithful to this Roman martyr, as archeological investigations confirm that Christians flocked to this site for centuries in veneration of the young virgin martyr.

### III. St. Agnes as a witness to the Splendor of Truth and Religious Liberty

Pope St. John Paul II in his encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*, speaks of the connection between martyrdom, the reality of the moral order, and the greatness of the human person:



Martyrdom rejects as false and illusory whatever 'human meaning' one might claim to attribute, even in 'exceptional' conditions, to an act morally evil in itself. Indeed, it even more clearly unmasks the true face of such an act: *it is a violation of man's 'humanity'*, in the one perpetrating it even before the one enduring it. Hence martyrdom is also the exaltation of a person's perfect 'humanity' and of true 'life,' as is attested by Saint Ignatius of Antioch, addressing the Christians of Rome, the place of his own martyrdom: 'Have mercy on me, brethren: do not hold me back from living; do not wish that I die... Let me arrive at the pure light; once there *I will be truly a man*. Let me imitate the passion of my God.'<sup>9</sup>

The martyrs, as John Paul II teaches, reveal the existence of an objective moral order. In other words, there is such a thing as good and evil in the world. If no such distinction exists then the witness of the martyrs would be nothing but an absurdity. But there is such a moral distinction in the world, and the human person has the unique capacity to come to know this moral order through faith and reason. Men and women



therefore have the lofty responsibility to choose rightly between the two. It is within the drama of this moral order that the greatness of the human person emerges, for by our daily moral choices the character of our lives unfolds. The martyrs, through their extraordinary acts of heroism in the face of brutal torture, reveal to us the existence of the moral order and remind us that it is never right to do wrong, never praiseworthy to deny the Lord Jesus for temporal gain: for “what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mk 8:36).



Similarly, St. Agnes rises in our day as a witness to authentic religious freedom for she refused to violate either her conscience or her love for Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI once stated:

Religious freedom is at the origin of moral freedom. Openness to truth and perfect goodness, openness to God, is rooted in human nature; it confers full dignity on each individual and is the guarantee of full mutual respect between persons. Religious freedom should be understood, then, not merely as immunity from coercion, but even more fundamentally as an ability to order one’s own choices in accordance with truth.<sup>10</sup>

Such witnesses to religious freedom are needed in our own age, an age which often reduces the transcendent aspirations of men and women to the political sphere and which views religious freedom as merely pertaining to private acts of worship or devotion. St. Agnes teaches us that our religious convictions permeate our lives and contribute to the public square through our defense of human dignity and freedom.



St. Agnes’s deep faith and love of the Lord Jesus, which threatened the all-encompassing grasp of the Roman Empire, also shatters the flatness of contemporary secularism which refuses to acknowledge any higher love than that which we can empirically observe. In our own time, St. Agnes excels as an example and teacher of religious freedom, for she chose the deepest principles of her conscience over the demands of the state.

### **Conclusion: St. Agnes, Patroness of the Young and Witness to the Risen Christ**

1,720 years after her martyrdom in Piazza Navona, St. Agnes continues to shine forth “as a credible witness of faith,”<sup>11</sup> reminding us that holiness of life remains possible even amid the challenges that inevitably arise over the course of our lives. All these centuries later St. Agnes shines ever brighter. In our age of moral relativism and rising secularism, Agnes’s life and martyrdom reveal to us that the dignity of the human person unfolds within the moral life. The word martyr means witness, and what an extraordinary witness she was.

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, writes these words to young people:

Christ is alive! We need to keep reminding ourselves of this, because we can risk seeing Jesus Christ simply as a fine model from the distant past, as a memory, as someone who saved us two thousand years ago. But that would be of no use to us: it would leave us unchanged, it would not set us free. The one who fills us with his grace, the one who liberates us, transforms us, heals and consoles us is someone fully alive.<sup>12</sup>

St. Agnes’s love for the Risen Lord Jesus stemmed from her deep faith in the power of his grace. God is alive, Christ is alive and at work in the hearts of men and women over the centuries. Agnes experienced the reality of the Lord’s life and love, and such an encounter propelled her to conform her



life completely to the Lord Jesus. For if Christ is not alive, for whom did Agnes give her heart? For whom did she surrender her life? For what did she give witness? Agnes reveals to us the reality of the Risen Lord Jesus alive and at work in the world.

St. Agnes continues to serve as a powerful example for young people because she reveals to us the possibility of excellence over mediocrity, of heroism over complacency. Even as a young girl she gave witness to the surpassing worth of the Christian faith, a worth that transcends all earthly loves and ambitions. A quotation often attributed to the writer C.S. Lewis underscores the significance of what Agnes teaches us about the Christian faith: “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”



To the young people of Long Island I repeat the words of our Holy Father: *Christ is alive!* The Catholic faith is true! It is the pearl of great price for which we ought to sell everything in order to have and hold (Mt 13:46). In searching for this great treasure with hearts alive with faith, hope, and love, we will discover the greatness of human life. There can be nothing more praiseworthy, nothing more valuable than following the Lord Jesus on the path of holiness and mission. In following Jesus he takes nothing away from us, and gives us the fullness of life (Jn 10:10).

St. Agnes, pray for us!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ John O. Barres".

Most Reverend John O. Barres

Bishop of Rockville Centre

## Endnotes

- 1 *The Liturgy of the Hours*. Memorial of St. Agnes. 21 January. Morning Prayer. Antiphon 2.
- 2 Most Reverend William F. Murphy. Pastoral Letter “St. Agnes Patroness of Youth.” 21 January 2004. Diocese of Rockville Centre.
- 3 St. Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Virginitly, Bk 1. 2.
- 4 Thomas Martin, *Ancient Roman: From Romulus to Justinian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 36.
- 5 *Ibid.* Bk 1.4.
- 6 Ambrose, *Epistola I Spuria* (Patrologia Latina PL 17, 735).
- 7 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30 December 1987, 36:  
“If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not out of place to speak of ‘structures of sin,’ which, as I stated in my Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behavior. ‘Sin’ and ‘structures of sin’ are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us.”  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html)
- 8 Benedict XVI. “Address to Teachers and Students of the Almo Collegio Capranica.” 20 January 2012.
- 9 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 92.
- 10 Benedict XVI. Message for the World Day of Peace. 1 January 2011.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20101208\\_xliv-world-day-peace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace.html)
- 11 Benedict XVI. “Address to Teachers and Students of the Almo Collegio Capranica.” 20 January 2012. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/january/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20120120\\_collegio-capranica.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120120_collegio-capranica.html)
- 12 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, 25 March 2019, 124.  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html)

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Page 2: Mosaic and Arch of the Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside-the-Walls, Rome, Italy. Photo by Jose Luiz (2016). This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 3 (left): Saint Agnes Statue in the vestibule of Saint Agnes Cathedral, Rockville Centre, N.Y. Located in the entry of the Cathedral inside the main doors this is a large wooden carved statue of Saint Agnes, virgin and martyr. Source: <https://stagnescathedral.org/virtual-tour/cathedral/>

Page 3 (right): Icon of Blessed Virgin Mary holding Jesus. In this icon by the ambo is the Blessed Virgin flanked by the Patroness of the Cathedral parish, Saint Agnes, along with Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Like Saint Agnes, Saint Catherine was martyred for her faith at a young age. Photo by Sean P. Dolan.

Page 4 (top): The main chamber of the crypt in Saint Agnes in Agone. This is the only surviving part of the ancient church constructed at the place where Saint Agnes was martyred. The crypt has been venerated as the site where Agnes was killed. Photo used with permission of Church of Saint Agnes in Agone.

Page 4 (bottom): Statue of Saint Agnes in Flames by Ercole Ferrata in the Church of Saint Agnes in Agone. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 5 (top): Marble altar showing the martyrdom of Saint Agnes, clothed only in her hair (Giovanni Buratti, 1661) in the crypt of Saint Agnes in Agone. This is the only surviving part of the ancient church constructed at the place where Saint Agnes was martyred. The crypt has been venerated as the site where Agnes was killed. Photo used with permission of Church of Saint Agnes in Agone.

Page 5 (bottom): Ancient oratory with altar at the place of martyrdom in the crypt of Saint Agnes in Agone. This is the only surviving part of the ancient church constructed at the place where Saint Agnes was martyred. The crypt has been venerated as the site where Agnes was killed. Photo used with permission of Church of Saint Agnes in Agone.

Page 6: Bishop Barres after celebrating Mass at the Church of Saint Agnes in Agone. From left: Father Michael Duffy, rector, Cathedral of Saint Agnes; Father Michael Bissex, Bishop Barres, Father Joseph Scolaro and Father Louis Cona.

Page 7 (top): Image of Church of Saint Agnese in Agone (Piazza Navona), Rome. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 7 (bottom): View of the Piazza Navona in Rome, Italy. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 8 (top): Pope Benedict XVI during a canonization Mass in Saint Peter's Square in Rome, Italy on Oct. 12, 2008. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 8 (bottom): Mosaic of Saint Agnes, from the basilica of Sant' Agnese fuori le mura, Rome. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Page 9: Photo of a painting of Saint Agnes by Domenichino (1581-1641). This is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art. The work of art itself is in the public domain. This work is in the public domain - <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-US>. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



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Produced by the Office of Communications  
(January 2024)

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