Saint Agnes

(Martyred c. 304; 
Feast day: January 21)

Agnes beatae virginis 
natalis est, quo spiritum 
caelo refudit debitum 
pio sacrata sanguine.

Matura martyrio fuit, 
matura nondum nuptiis; 
nutabat in viris fides 
cedebat et fessus senex.

Metu parentes territi 
clastrum pudoris auxerant; 
solvit fores custodiae 
fides teneri nescia.

Prodire quis nuptum putet, 
sic lata vultu ducitur, 
novas viro ferens opes, 
dotata censu sanguinis.

Aras nefandi numinis 
adolere tædis cogitur; 
respondet: ‘Haud tales faces 
sumpsere Christi virgines;

‘hic ignis exstinguit fidem, 
hæc flamma lumen eripit. 
Hic, hic ferite, ut profluo 
cruore restinguam focos!’

Percussa quam pompam tuit! 
Nam veste se totam tegens 
curam pudoris præstitit 
ne quis retectam cerneret.

In morte vivebat pudor, 
vultumque texerat manu. 
Terram genu flexo petit, 
lapsu versucundo cadens.

This is the day of Agnes’ birth, 
when that virgin blest gave back to God 
the life she had been loaned on earth 
and hallowed by her loyal blood.

Though still too young to be a bride 
but not too young to be a martyr, 
while many a weary elder denied 
the Faith, she clung to it all the harder.

Her anxious parents, sick with fear, 
protected her and her purity; 
but her faith, becoming ever more dear, 
spurned all such means of security.

So happy she looked when led away 
that she seemed as if about to wed 
and dower a groom that very day. 
Her dowry! The blood she would soon shed.

Dragged before an idol’s altar 
and handed a torch to make it bright, 
she answered bravely and did not falter: 
‘We maids of Christ use no such light, 
‘for its flame extinguishes true faith 
and drives away the light of God. 
So strike me here—yes, here—that my death 
may drown your flames in my very blood!’

When they struck, what majesty she showed! 
With the modesty so dear to her, 
lest anyone see her flesh unclothed, 
she clasped her garments near to her.

Came death. Her virtue firm’d by grace, 
as she sank to the ground on bended knee, 
with trembling hand she veiled her face 
and forever enshrined her purity.

—St. Ambrose, 
Archbishop of Milan, 
c. 340–April 4, 397

—Edmond Bonin, 
translator