

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Agnes of Rome

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Agnes of Rome

Young virgin and martyr of Rome in the early 4th century, one of the most venerated saints of Rome, patron saint of young girls.

Feast day	January 21
Born	c. 291, Rome
Died	c. 304, Rome
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since the 4th century)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	young girls, engaged couples, chastity

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr

Novena to Saint Agnes

Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, Tomb of Saint Agnes in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Agnes of Rome

Saint Agnes was a young Roman girl who died a martyr around 304, at the age of twelve or thirteen according to ancient witnesses. Saint Ambrose, Pope Damasus and the poet Prudentius celebrated her memory less than a century after her death, and her name appears in the oldest Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Church. Her feast day is January 21, and she remains one of the best-loved martyrs of Rome, where two great churches are dedicated to her.

Who was Saint Agnes?

Very little is known for certain about the life of Agnes. She probably belonged to a Christian family of Rome and died young during one of the persecutions, most likely that of Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th century. She was buried in a cemetery on the Via Nomentana, north of the city, and her tomb at once became a place of veneration. What is certain is the age and fervor of her cult: few saints of that period left such early testimonies.

The more detailed accounts of her passion, written later, mix historical elements with legendary features. They tell how Agnes, beautiful and courted, refused to marry the son of a prefect, declaring that she had already given herself to Christ. Denounced as a Christian, she was exposed in a place of shame, miraculously protected, and then put to death by the sword.

Key dates in the life of Saint Agnes

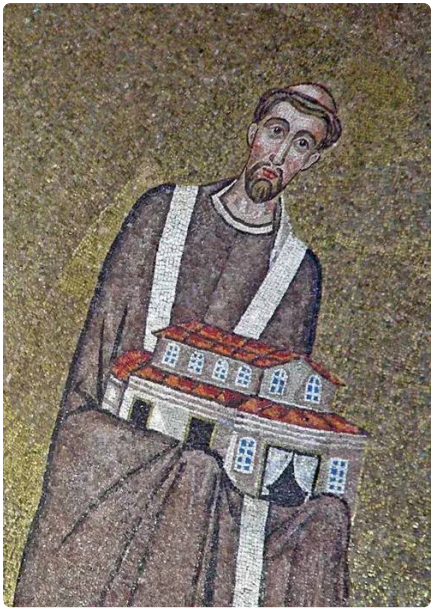
- **Around 291**: Born in Rome, according to the tradition that she died at twelve or thirteen.
- **Around 304**: Martyred in Rome, probably during the persecution of Diocletian.

- **Around 337-351**: Constantina, daughter of Emperor Constantine, builds a large basilica near her tomb on the Via Nomentana.
- **366-384**: Pope Damasus has a verse inscription carved in her honor.
- **Around 377**: Saint Ambrose praises her in his treatise *On Virgins*.
- **Around 405**: The poet Prudentius dedicates a hymn to her in his *Crowns of the Martyrs*.
- **625-638**: Pope Honorius I rebuilds the present basilica and commissions the apse mosaic.
- **1605**: Her remains are placed in a silver reliquary under the altar of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, by order of Pope Paul V.
- **1652**: Construction begins on Sant'Agnese in Agone, in Piazza Navona, on the traditional site of her humiliation.

The witness of the Fathers of the Church

The most precious testimony comes from Saint Ambrose of Milan. In his treatise *On Virgins*, written around 377, he marvels that so young a child faced death with more firmness than many adults: she was, he says in substance, too young to be punished, yet already ripe for victory. Ambrose stresses that she went to the executioner joyfully, as one goes to a wedding.

Pope Damasus, the great restorer of the martyrs' tombs, had a verse inscription placed near her grave, and it still exists in the basilica on the Via Nomentana. In it he records the tradition that Agnes, stripped of her clothes, covered her body with her hair. A few years later, the Spanish poet Prudentius sang of the young martyr in his turn. Finally, her name appears in the Roman Canon, the First Eucharistic Prayer, alongside Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Cecilia and Anastasia.



Saint Agnes, apse mosaic of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura in Rome (7th century).

The lamb, symbol of Saint Agnes

Agnes is almost always shown with a lamb. The symbol comes first from the likeness between her name and the Latin *agnus*, lamb, an image of Christ sacrificed and of innocence; the Greek name Agnes itself means "pure" or "chaste." The palm recalls her martyrdom, and the ring, present in some images, the tradition of her mystical marriage to Christ.

This symbolism gave rise to a very old Roman custom that is still alive. Every January 21, at the basilica of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, two lambs are blessed during the Mass of the feast. They are then presented to the pope and entrusted to a religious community that raises them. Their wool is used to weave the pallia, the bands of white wool marked with black crosses that the pope gives to metropolitan archbishops on June 29 as a sign of communion with the successor of Peter.

Two Roman churches

The cult of Agnes is rooted in two places in Rome. On the Via Nomentana, the basilica of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura (Saint Agnes Outside the Walls) keeps her tomb, at the level of the catacomb, and the famous Byzantine mosaic of the 7th century. Right next to it stands the mausoleum of Constantina, now the church of Santa Costanza, with its 4th-century mosaics.

In the heart of the city, in Piazza Navona, rises the baroque church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, built from 1652 on the site of the ancient Stadium of Domitian, where tradition places the exposure of Agnes. Borromini designed its facade and dome. A chapel there keeps a relic venerated as her skull.

Why is Saint Agnes the patron saint of young girls?

Agnes is the patron saint of young girls and of engaged couples. She was barely more than a child when she died, and the Fathers of the Church saw in her an image of the whole Church, betrothed to Christ and faithful to his love. She is invoked for the young, for those preparing for marriage or for consecrated life, and for all who must stand firm in their convictions.

In the English-speaking world, her feast also left a trace in folklore: on Saint Agnes' Eve, the night of January 20, girls once hoped to dream of their future husbands, a custom that inspired John Keats' poem *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Her lasting message, however, is simpler: age does nothing to limit the depth of faith. In a time when Christians risked their lives, a teenager preferred fidelity to Christ to safety, marriage and life itself.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Agnes, or follow the novena to Saint Agnes from January 12 to 20, so that it ends on the eve of her feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Agnes in art

In paintings, statues and stained glass, Agnes appears as a young girl holding a lamb, or with a lamb at her feet. She often carries the palm of martyrs and sometimes wears a crown or a ring. Some images show her long hair covering her body, after the tradition recorded by Pope Damasus, or the sword of her martyrdom. In the 7th-century mosaic of her basilica she is dressed as a Byzantine empress against a gold background.

Where to pray to Saint Agnes

- **Rome**: the basilica of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, on the Via Nomentana, which holds her tomb; her catacomb can be visited with a guide.
- **Rome**: the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, in Piazza Navona.
- **Rome**: the mausoleum of Santa Costanza, next to the basilica on the Via Nomentana.
- **Rome**: the basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, whose nuns are traditionally associated with weaving the pallia.



The church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, Piazza Navona, Rome (17th century).

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr

Saint Agnes left no writings: she died as a teenager around 304. But the Church has prayed with her for sixteen centuries. This page brings together the collect of her Mass, still in use in the Roman Missal, a passage from Saint Ambrose on her martyrdom, and an original prayer to Saint Agnes.

The collect of the Mass of Saint Agnes

This prayer, called the "collect," is said at the beginning of Mass on January 21. It belongs to the ancient Roman liturgical tradition; the translation from the Latin is by Saintspedia.

> *Almighty ever-living God, who choose what is weak in the world to confound the strong, grant that we, who celebrate the heavenly birthday of your martyr Saint Agnes, may follow the constancy of her faith. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Source: Roman Missal, Mass of Saint Agnes, virgin and martyr (January 21), collect ("Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, qui infirma mundi eligis...").

Words of Saint Ambrose to meditate on

> *"She was not yet of an age to be punished, but she was already ripe for victory."*

Source: Saint Ambrose of Milan, *On Virgins* (*De virginibus*), book I, chapter 2, around 377; translation by Saintspedia. The Church reads this text in the Office of Readings on January 21.

The liturgy of her feast also uses an antiphon taken from the ancient account of her passion, which belongs to tradition more than to history: "My Lord Jesus Christ has betrothed me with his ring and adorned me with a crown as his bride."

Prayer to Saint Agnes for purity and courage

Saint Agnes, you gave your life to Christ when you were only a child: pray for me.

You were not afraid of threats or swayed by promises: obtain for me an upright and free heart, one that cannot be bought by flattery or paralyzed by fear.

I entrust to you the young people of today, so often exposed to the gaze and judgment of others. Keep them in self-respect and in the joy of faith. I also entrust to you those preparing for marriage or for consecrated life, that they may give their lives with the same generosity as you. And I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

You are shown with a lamb: lead me to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Agnes' feast day is January 21, the day after Saint Sebastian. On that day in Rome, the lambs whose wool will be used for the pallia are blessed. You can pray to her throughout the year for young people and for engaged couples, or whenever you need courage to stay faithful to your convictions. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Agnes, and discover the life of Saint Agnes.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Agnes

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and cult of Saint Agnes of Rome. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast on January 21, begin on January 12; it ends on January 20.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

This novena is well suited to young people, to engaged couples, and to anyone who needs courage to remain faithful. It can be prayed alone, as a family or in a youth group, and at any time of the year.

Day 1: A young faith

Agnes was twelve or thirteen years old. Saint Ambrose marveled that so young a child could be so steadfast. God does not measure holiness by the number of years. A child's faith can be as deep as that of the wisest adult.

Prayer: Lord, keep in me a young faith, fresh and trusting, whatever my age.

Today: Pray for a child or teenager you know.

Day 2: Belonging to Christ

According to the account of her passion, Agnes refused a wealthy marriage, saying that she already belonged to Christ. Every Christian life begins with this choice: to whom do I give my heart? The answer is not given once and for all: it is renewed each morning, in small decisions as much as in great ones.

Prayer: Jesus, I want to be yours. Free my heart from everything that holds me far from you.

Today: Silently renew the promises of your baptism.

Day 3: Resisting pressure

Agnes' persecutors tried to make her give in, first with promises, then with threats. Today too, the pressure of the group, of fashion or of opinion can bend consciences. Agnes reminds us that fidelity is possible, and that it is rarely as lonely as it seems: Christ stands beside those who stand firm.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the strength to stay faithful to what I believe is right, without harshness toward others.

Today: Once today, refuse to join in mockery or to pass on a rumor.

Day 4: Purity of heart

In Greek, the name Agnes evokes purity. Purity is not first a rule, but a clear way of looking at ourselves and at others, one that respects the dignity of every person.

Prayer: Lord, purify my gaze and my thoughts, so that I may see others as you see them.

Today: Deliberately avoid an image or a conversation that degrades the dignity of people.

Day 5: Protected in trial

Tradition tells that Agnes, exposed to humiliation, was protected by God. Whatever part of this is legend, the Church reads in it a certainty: God does not abandon those who trust in him.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you all who have been humiliated, abused or wounded in their bodies. Protect them and raise them up.

Today: Support, by prayer or a donation, an organization that helps victims of violence.

Day 6: Going with joy

Saint Ambrose writes that Agnes went to her death more joyfully than a bride goes to her wedding. Christian joy does not deny suffering: it knows to whom it is going. Joy of this kind is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and it can be asked for, even on gray days.

Prayer: Lord, give me a joy that trials cannot take away from me.

Today: Do willingly a task you usually drag your feet over.



Sant'Agnese in Agone, Piazza Navona, Rome.

Day 7: The Lamb of God

Agnes is shown with a lamb. It points to Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." The martyr leads us to the one for whom she gave her life. At every Mass, before Communion, we hear these words again and are invited to the supper of the Lamb.

Prayer: Lamb of God, have mercy on me, and grant me your peace.

Today: Go to a weekday Mass, or spend some time in adoration.

Day 8: Bound to the Church

The wool of the lambs blessed on her feast is used to weave the pallia of archbishops. Each year, Agnes is thus associated with the unity of the Church around the pope.

Prayer: Lord, I pray for the pope, for our bishop and for the unity of your Church.

Today: Pray especially for your bishop and for the priests of your parish.

Day 9: Giving one's life

Agnes gave her whole life at once. Most of us give ours day by day, in marriage, in consecrated life, at work, in service. It is the same love. A faithful marriage, a promise kept, a service rendered with patience: these too are a way of saying to Christ, as Agnes did, that we belong to him.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Agnes, teach me to give you my life, day after day, with a generous heart. Amen.

Today: In the morning, offer to God the whole day that is beginning.

Closing prayer

Saint Agnes, young martyr of Rome, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for young people, for engaged couples and for those who suffer because of their faith. Obtain for us a pure heart, a quiet courage and a faithful joy. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Agnes and the prayer to Saint Agnes.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, Tomb of Saint Agnes in Rome

The Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls (Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura) stands on the Via Nomentana, northeast of central Rome, above the catacomb where the young martyr was buried around 304. It still houses her tomb and, together with the neighboring Mausoleum of Santa Costanza, forms one of the most moving early Christian complexes in the city.

From catacomb to basilica

Agnes was laid to rest in an underground cemetery along the Via Nomentana. In the 4th century, Constantina, daughter of the Emperor Constantine, had a vast funerary basilica built nearby, of which ruins remain, along with her own mausoleum, now the church of Santa Costanza. In the 7th century, Pope Honorius I built a new church directly over the tomb: this is the present basilica, partly below ground level, which one still enters by descending a long staircase.



The Basilica of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, on the Via Nomentana in Rome.

The mosaic and the tomb

In the apse, a 7th-century gold-ground mosaic shows Agnes dressed as a Byzantine empress, standing between two popes, one of whom, Honorius, holds a model of the church. Beneath the altar, a silver urn given by Pope Paul V in 1605 holds her remains, together with those of Saint Emerentiana, her foster sister according to tradition, who is said to have been stoned while praying at her tomb. A verse inscription by Pope Damasus, carved in the 4th century, is preserved on the access staircase.

The blessing of the lambs

Every January 21, during the Mass of the feast, two lambs are blessed in the basilica, a tradition attested for centuries. They are then presented to the pope and entrusted to nuns who raise them. Their wool is used to make the palliums

that the pope gives to new metropolitan archbishops on June 29, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Agnes

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Agnes. In the basilica, a time of silence before the altar is a good moment to entrust an intention, for example for a young person or an engaged couple. The collect of Saint Agnes suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The interior of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls and the apse mosaic.

Other places associated with Saint Agnes

- **The Mausoleum of Santa Costanza**, next to the basilica, with its 4th-century mosaics.
- **The Catacomb of Saint Agnes**, beneath the basilica, which can be visited with a guide.
- **Sant'Agnese in Agone**, in Piazza Navona, built on the traditional site of her humiliation, with the relic of her skull.

- **Santa Cecilia in Trastevere**, whose nuns were long associated with the making of the palliums.

Practical information

The basilica is on the Via Nomentana, a few kilometers from the historic center, and can be reached by bus or metro (Line B1, Sant'Agnese/Annibaliano station). It is staffed by the Canons Regular of the Lateran. The catacomb can only be visited with a guide. Check the times of Masses and visits with the basilica before you come, especially around January 21, when crowds are large.

CREDITS

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