

SAINTS OF THE CHURCH

Session 1

Agnes of Rome

FOCUS

The Church honors as “saints” certain persons in its history who have been brave and outstanding witnesses to Jesus Christ. Among the saints and martyrs (persons who suffered and died for their faith) is Agnes of Rome, who refused to worship other gods. Her name means “pure” in Greek and “lamb” in Latin. The learners should be able to define “martyr” and to tell why we remember the faith of Agnes.

GETTING READY

During the early centuries of Christian history, many of Christ's followers refused to abandon their faith when it was opposed. The Roman empire tolerated the new religious sect for only a short time. It soon became obvious that what Christians believed was just the opposite of Roman beliefs and posed a threat to the Roman way of life.

The Romans believed in many gods; the Christians believed in one God. The Romans valued the state—the government and the emperor—over all else. Christians valued God above all else. Romans believed that family loyalty led to loyal service of Rome. Christians often left their families in order to worship God through Jesus Christ.

Agnes lived during a time of particularly intense persecution of the Christians by the Romans. Many people were asked to give up their belief in the Christian God and worship the emperor. Those who stood firm and refused were put to death.

As a young girl, Agnes lived in Rome. Because of her wealth and beauty, she was courted by young suitors who wanted her as a bride. Instead, she devoted her life to serving Jesus. This was dangerous because the Emperor of Rome, Diocletian, had decided to kill anyone who would not obey Roman law and worship Roman gods. The young men who had courted her reported her to Roman officials.

Faced with condemnation and certain death, Agnes bravely refused to give up her faith and devotion to the Lord. She was killed by a sword. Agnes' death, in 304 CE, was especially sad because she was so young.

In legend, Agnes appeared to her grieving parents after she died. She was smiling and carrying a small, white lamb. Her name means “pure” in Greek and “lamb” in Latin. We remember her on January 21. “Come away to the skies” (*The Hymnal 1982*, 213) is appointed for singing on St. Agnes Day.

Almighty and everlasting God, you choose those whom the world deems powerless to put the powerful to shame: Grant us so to cherish the memory of your youthful martyr Agnes, that we may share her pure and steadfast faith in you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Agnes
Lesser Feasts and Fasts (4th ed.), p. 127

TEACHING TIP

Some of the details of saints' lives are gruesome. Focus on each person's love for God and God's love for the person. Their faithful devotion to God, even in the face of death, was stronger than anything else in their lives.

Emphasize this devotion, and stress that the lives of the saints are examples for all of us.

GATHERING

Ahead of time, prepare signs to post in the classroom, prohibiting Christian worship:

You may not pray.

You may not read the Bible.

You may not say the name of Jesus.

You may not sing hymns.

You may not meet for Holy Communion.

Note: for non-readers, you may want to use small pictures of the forbidden activities with an X or line drawn through them.

As the learners arrive, invite them to read the signs. Ask: How do they make you feel? What would you do if you were told you *must* obey the signs?

Conclude the Gathering with “A Prayer attributed to St. Francis” from *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 833. The words are included on Poster No. 13 in the Teacher's Packet.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

STORYTELLING *(Time: 10 minutes)*

Open the Bible, and read aloud *Matthew 18:2-5*:

(Jesus) “called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’”

Finish with the words: The word of the Lord.

Learners respond: Thanks be to God.

In your own words, share the story of Agnes of Rome using information from Getting Ready and the outline below:

1. Agnes was a young girl, about thirteen years old, who lived in Rome in the third century. She was very beautiful and belonged to a wealthy family.

2. Agnes was a Christian who decided not to marry but to devote her life to serving Jesus. This was a serious decision for a young girl in Roman times.

3. The Roman emperor Diocletian thought Christians were dangerous. He decided to kill anyone who would not obey the Roman law and worship the Roman gods.

4. Roman law expected women to marry and have children. The Romans believed that they would live on after death through their children. The more children they had, the bigger the legacy they would leave. They also thought large families would keep the Roman empire strong.

5. Several eligible young men of wealthy Roman families wanted to marry Agnes because of her beauty. When Agnes refused to marry, they reported her to the officials.

6. Even when she was faced with death, she would not give up her faith or her devotion to Christ. Agnes was put to death by the sword. Her body is buried on the Via Nomentana in Rome.

7. A legend says that Agnes appeared to her grieving parents after her death. In the vision she was happy and smiling, carrying a little white lamb. Pictures of Agnes usually show her with a lamb. She is the patron saint of girls. Her name means “pure” in Greek and “lamb” in Latin.

(Encourage the children to read at home the story of Agnes in the learners' book, *Saints of the Church*, chapter 1.)

CREATING *(Time: 15-20 minutes)*

Option 1. Lamb Prints

Provide each learner with a piece of blue or green construction paper and thick white poster paint. Invite the learners to make a flock of lambs on their paper sheets, using sponges or their thumbs. When the paint has dried, the learners may use markers to add legs, ears, and other features to the lambs.

Option 2. Lamb Puppets

Provide for each learner a brown lunch bag, scraps of white and black construction paper, glue, yarn or cotton balls, and crayons or markers. The class members can create lamb puppets, using the bottoms of the bags for the heads. Add eyes, ears, noses, and other details. Yarn or cotton balls can be glued to the bags to simulate fleece.

EXPLORING THE STORY *(Time: 10-15 minutes)*

Option 1. Game, “I Choose to Follow Jesus”

Make a line of chairs facing in alternate directions. There should be enough chairs for all but one player. The player without a chair is Agnes.

Everyone except Agnes sits in the chairs. Agnes walks around the chairs,

taps another player, and says, “I believe in Jesus.” The second player gets up to follow saying, “I choose to follow Jesus, too.” The game continues until all players are standing.

Agnes then gives a signal and everyone sits in a chair. The one left standing is the new Agnes. The game can be repeated as long as interest and time permit.

Option 2. Puzzle, “Agnes of Rome”

Use Puzzle Sheet IV.1 titled “Agnes of Rome.” Make copies for everyone in the class. Directions are given on the sheet.

This can be a class or small group activity, or learners may work independently.

Option 3. Prayer Book Search

Invite the learners to look in *The Book of Common Prayer* at the Calendar of the Church Year on page 19. Note that there is a page for each month. Ask them to locate Agnes in January. Ask: Who are the other saints in January? Choose one or two other months to examine. Explain that the days listed in bold black print are Feast Days of the Church. Holy Eucharist is celebrated on these days.

TALKING IT OVER (*Time: 10-15 minutes*)

Agnes was a young girl when she died for her belief in Jesus Christ. She was able to make a very difficult decision and stick to it in spite of threats from others.

Ask: What are some hard decisions children have to make today? How can our faith in Jesus help us to do what is right? What can we do when other people push us to make wrong decisions? How do you feel when you have made a choice you know is right? How do others help you choose?

INQUIRING (*Time: 10-20 minutes*)

If possible, arrange a tour of the church. Look for stained glass windows, statues, pictures, and other representations or symbols for saints. Discuss why churches might want these things for others to see. (If your church does not contain such examples, check out library books on the saints and arrange a display.)

IMAGINING (*Time: 10-20 minutes*)

Share a story starter: “After her death, Agnes appeared to her family in a vision. Agnes told her parents” Invite the learners to use their imaginations and describe the way Agnes may have looked. What would she tell her family?

Individual response. The children can write their own endings or draw pictures. Encourage the learners to express their own thoughts. Avoid giving the impression that there is a “right” way to finish the story.

Group role play. Individuals or small groups can dramatize parts of Agnes' story: Her refusal to marry the young men; her profession of faith in the face of threats by the Roman officials; her appearance to her family after her death.

MUSIC (Time: 10-15 minutes)

Introduce the hymn, “Come away to the skies” (*The Hymnal 1982*, 213) by listening to it on the *Children Sing!* tape. This is a lively hymn, appropriate for remembering Saint Agnes because it has been appointed for singing on her day (January 21). Provide ribbons, scarfs, or streamers, and invite the learners to move gracefully as the words are sung or said.

CONTINUING ACTIVITY (Time: 10-20 minutes)

Saints Sun Catchers. Begin a collection of symbols for the Saints in the form of window medallions. From Poster No. 14 in the Teacher's Packet, duplicate the pattern for Agnes of Rome. Make a copy for each member of the class. Invite the learners to color the symbols with wax crayons. When they are finished, lightly rub the paper with baby oil on a cotton ball until the medallions are translucent. The symbols can then be hung with string or taped to a window. During the unit, decide at each session on which symbols to display in the classroom. Save the others in folders to be distributed at the end of the unit.

TAKE-HOME CARD

Card 28 has a picture of Agnes of Rome, a Scripture verse, facts about the story, and a question to think about. Remind children that the cards can be collected and displayed with others received this year.

CLOSING

Conclude the session with the following prayer:

We give thanks for . . . (*add thanksgivings*).
Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours,
and grant that we may serve Christ in them,
and love one another as he loves us. Amen.

From The Prayers of the People, Form IV
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 388

Stand in a circle and say:

Teacher: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Learners: Thanks be to God.

TEACHER'S REFLECTION

The lives of the Saints are attractive role models for primary-age children. What did the learners say about Agnes? Was there evidence that they sensed her deep devotion to God? Consider how the lives of the Saints can enrich the lives of the children as this unit progresses.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the next session, the focus is on Athanasius, who was a significant

figure in the development of the Nicene Creed. Read this Creed and think about its meaning in your life. Note especially the concept of the Trinity.