

January 21

Agnes (3rd cent.) martyr

In the second half of the third century, on 21 January of an unknown year, Agnes, barely thirteen years old, died as a martyr in Rome. Her great strength of spirit, which according to the hagiographers was the result of an unshakeable faith in spite of her frailty as an adolescent and her slight figure, made her one of the most famous martyrs of all Christianity. Her *passio*, which has come down to us in Greek, Latin, and Syriac versions of the fifth century, was already known to all the great fathers of the Church. Ambrose, Augustine, pope Damasus, Jerome, Maximus of Turin, Gregory the Great, the Venerable Bede, Prudentius, later the Carolingian poets, and finally James of Varaigne offer touching portraits of the young Agnes, all of them based on an oral tradition of great antiquity.

The saint's iconography too had an enormous development. In the representations, especially of the Middle Ages, Agnes appears with a lamb at her side, in memory of her name and of the dream her parents had, according to the legend, eight days after her death, when they saw her passing together with other martyrs by a lamb without spot.

On the spot where her body was laid, already Constantina, the daughter of Constantine, built a basilica, which was several times restructured and finally rebuilt in Byzantine style and which still today is one of Rome's principal churches.

Agnes's name appears in the Roman canon, the principal Eucharistic prayer of the Latin Church.

BIBLICAL READINGS

Sir 51:1-3; Rev 7:13-17; Mt 18:1-7

Abo of Tiflis (d. 786) martyr

The Georgian Church today recalls the passion and death of Abo of Tiflis, put to death by the Abbasid caliph Musa al-Hadi on 6 January 786 for having abandoned the Muslim religion in favor of Christianity.

We have Abo's story thanks to the valuable *passio* written by his contemporary, the Georgian John son of Saban.

Abo was born in Baghdad, where he was educated by the best Muslim guides. He became skilled in perfume-making and also an expert in Arab letters, then entered the service of the Christian noble Nerses, duke of Georgia. Georgia had passed under Abbasid dominion shortly before, but its Christian rulers were left as ethnarchs in their respective seats.

After various adventures Nerses returned to Georgia, and Abo followed him. Since he was a man of letters and of culture, he quickly learned to appreciate Christianity, although he did not profess it openly.

As hostility towards Christians intensified, the household of Nerses was forced to emigrate to the territory of the Khazars. Here Abo received baptism. When he returned to Tiflis he was accused of infidelity to Islam and was required to abjure his new faith. In great peace and simplicity he refused and bravely underwent the long series of sufferings that led to the supreme gift of martyrdom.

BIBLICAL READINGS

2 Tim 2:1-10; Jn 15:17-16:2

Maxim the Confessor (580-662) monk and church father

In 662 in a remote village of the Caucasus died Maxim the Confessor, monk and father of the Church.

Born in Constantinople in 580, thanks to his brilliantly finished studies, in 610 he became, according to the hagiographic tradition regarding him, first secretary of the emperor Heraclius. After three years Maxim left this employment and became a monk at Chrysopolis. When the Persian invasion forced him to leave the monastery in 626, he began to lead a wandering life in Crete, in Cyprus, in Africa, and perhaps in Rome, and in this way contributed to making Greek theology known in the West.

As an author of works on prayer, on the struggle against the passions, and on charity, Maxim developed the theological foundations of the eastern doctrine on the divinization of man, then, from 649, was involved in theological disputes against monophysites and monothelites. His position was adopted by the Lateran synod of 649, convoked by the pope of Rome Martin, together with whom four years later he was tried and exiled.

In 662 a new trial condemned Maxim to the amputation of his right hand and of his tongue, to hinder him from writing and speaking in defense of the orthodox faith.

Thus, he who had fixed his gaze on the passion and on the role of Christ's human will in accepting his own death came to resemble his Lord ever more, to the point of dying alone, abandoned by all, a few months after the bitter sentence that had given him the means to become mysteriously, but all the more fully a confessor of the faith.

BIBLICAL READINGS

Heb 11:33-40; Lk 12:8-12

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ANGLICANS:

Agnes, martyr at Rome

WESTERN CATHOLICS:

Agnes, virgin and martyr (Roman and Ambrosian calendars)

Fructuosus of Tarragona, bishop, and *Augurius and Eulogius* (d. 259), martyrs (Spanish-Mozarabic calendar)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (12 tubah/terr):

Second day of the Glorious Baptism

LUTHERANS:

Matthias Claudius (d. 1815), poet at Hamburg

MARONITES:

Sebastian (d. ca. 287), martyr

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Maxim the Confessor, monk

Neophyte of Nicea (4th cent.), martyr

Gregory (d. 1012), archbishop of Ohrid (Serbian Church)

Abo of Tiflis, martyr (Georgian Church)

OLD CATHOLICS:

Meinrad (d. 861), hermit and martyr