

Address at St. Agatha's, Portsmouth, 9th February 2008 by Fr Aidan Nichols OP

It is a pleasure to be with you this morning, in this historic church, to say some words in honour of your patron, Agatha. She was a figure partially obscured by the mists of time. She comes towards us from the age which succeeded the apostles and, on their foundation, was sending out the message of the Gospel in the words of the first Fathers of the Church. After the peace of the Church, when the spasmodic persecutions ceased, Agatha soon became a favourite figure to include when mosaic workers were commissioned to work out a visual equivalent of that message. And so she gazes out at us in for example, the basilica of Saint Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, from what the poet Yeats, describing such mosaics, called 'sages standing in God's holy fire.'

We know she was Sicilian, that she was an ascetic - someone who had consecrated herself to God as a virgin - and that, not merely after her vow but because of it. The finger of the persecuting authority pointed to her, and she became a martyr. I don't think the connexion between virginity and martyrdom is just by chance. A hedonistic, fairly decadent, society may be impressed when beautiful young women renounce the use of sex for religious reasons, or, alternatively, such a society may be infuriated by it. It doesn't surprise me that local government officials in the late Roman empire handed over Agatha to a brothel-keeper, even if the name 'Aphrodisia' given to this madame is fairly obviously *faute de mieux*. What does surprise me, if anything, is the way critical historians are so sceptical of ancient accounts of martyrdom that pile on the agony. When the brothel treatment failed, says the Acts of Agatha's martyrdom, she was tortured by rods, rack and fire, before her breasts were cut off and she died in prison as the result of other sufferings. Many historians consider this narrative excessive, and so assign it the status of a literary device: in plain English, fiction. One wonders where they were living in the twentieth century, century of countless barbarities in war, civil or international, and in terrorism, state or group, not to mention the usual occasional pathological acts of obscene violence committed by private persons against each other.

Last summer, I was lucky enough to be given a ride on the Orient Express, from London to Venice, and obviously that was an opportunity to re-read *Murder on the Orient Express* by another Agatha, Agatha Christie. Christie saw her detective stories - I quote from the authorized biography - as 'morality plays, demonstrating that there was wickedness in the world'. And the author of this biography, Janet Morgan, went on to say that the second lesson of Agatha Christie's morality plays was that such wickedness 'could be found out and sin expiated'. If there is no such thing as wickedness, only moral feebleness, itself the consequence of social or psychological conditioning, then of course we don't need a religion of redemption like Christianity. But just as the same social or psychological conditions can be an invitation to moral evil for some and for others a challenge to embody all the virtues, so not all moral evil is weakness of will. Some of it is sheer open-eyed malice.

May I stay with this other Agatha for a further moment? At some time in the 1960's Agatha Christie was sent a questionnaire by an Italian magazine. Among other things they asked her what she thought was the cause of the increasingly active role of women in society. The other Agatha replied by attributing that increasingly active social role to 'the foolishness of women in relinquishing the position of privilege obtained after many centuries of civilization. 'Primitive women [she went on] toil incessantly. We [i.e. modern women] seemed determined to return to that state voluntarily - or by listening to persuasion'. And in that way, concluded Christie, women 'forfeit the joys of leisure and creative thought and perfecting of home conditions'. There is certainly a price to be paid, in terms of family and household ethos, when both spouses go out to work full-time, and a consecrated woman - an ascetic, a nun - could be considered someone who concentrates on the joy of leisure, for which the Latin word, *otium*, is virtually synonymous with contemplation, and contemplation generates or should do creative thought and helps to make a dwelling - a home - Christian in the fullest sense. It was that way of life as well as life itself of which Agatha the virgin was stripped when she became St. Agatha the martyr. Her martyrdom adds sacrilege to injustice, because that basic monastic impulse - for women to develop in a dedicated life the contemplative gifts the Holy Spirit scatters among them - is something highly prized by the Church of Jesus Christ. These are women who, in our Lord's own words in St. Luke's Gospel, have chosen the better part and it shall not be taken from them.

In the Catholic Revival in the Church of England, many women who had answered that call to contemplative living also generously sacrificed the normal, traditional conditions for living out that call, because they had also heard another call - the cry of the poor in the industrial, commercial or other urban slums of the nineteenth century. The anarchic over-development of industrialism in our green island, and the urban explosion which overwhelmed communities that had grown slowly over the centuries and rendered them dysfunctional, was a nightmare for the poor. But it was an invitation to holiness for the Anglican and Catholic sisterhoods and slum priests like Father Dolling who abandoned the privileges of wealth and status to live their lives amid ugliness and deprivation, squalor not only physical but moral - and rarely more so than here in Landport with its sweated labour, sin-shops, Rachmanite landlords and possibly nationally unequalled levels of prostitution. When we consider what priests like Dolling and others achieved just in sheer numerical terms of people housed, fed, educated, and re-trained for useful or honourable work, it brings home to us the comparative lack of impact which the Church has in Britain today. Of course the State has taken over much of the Church's work and does it more systematically if also, often, without the human touch the Church can bring. But if the materially poor are less in evidence today than in Dolling's day, the spiritually poor are far more in evidence today than then. We have a simply enormous mission to England when we think of it in terms of re-ordering lives and giving people a comprehensive framework in which to live them, an inspiration that can bring out the best in them, for time and for eternity.

In some way all of us, whatever our role in the Church, have to be martyrs in the sense of giving testimony, *martyria*, to the people of our day. When St. Gregory the Great, the pope who sent Augustine to Canterbury and so initiated the tradition of which you and I are offshoots in different respects, added to the Roman canon the name of St. Agatha, she took her place in a carefully structured list of names, the point of which was, precisely, to show the universal character of that call to witness. In the prayer *Nobis quoque* of the Roman Canon are fourteen names, twice the Scriptural number of perfection, seven. There is one list of seven men, and one list of seven women. The list of seven men moves from bishops to priests to laymen. The list of seven women achieves its own kind of universality by moving West to East - from Africa, through Sicily (here comes Agatha) via Rome to (with Anastasia) the Church in the Byzantine world.

Your own church, the Traditional Anglican Communion, also encompasses this kind of global outreach, with congregations in (if I have my facts right) the Americas and Africa, Asia, Australasia and Europe. Catholicity of outreach, implantation in many nations, is of course one of the marks of the Church. The Church should, yes, be deeply rooted in each nation, have a local habitation and a name. That is a consequence of the Incarnation, of the Flesh-taking of the divine Word in one place, among one people. Anglicanism has succeeded so well in that task that for many people Anglicanism is virtually the same thing as Englishness, despite the way that since the sixteenth century English Christianity has broken up into three, with recusants and Protestant Nonconformists alongside the Church of England, and, in the same period, Anglicanism has itself ventured far afield with colonization abroad. But the Church cannot afford to be *too* identified with any one nation, lest the particular features of that nation, or its changing moods or trends over time, lead the Christian people astray. The Church is meant to be the mother of all nations, and that too is a consequence of the Incarnation because when the Incarnate One who suffered for us was lifted up into his Easter victory he became the world's Lord, the nations' universal King. All authority in heaven and earth was given him and in the Great Commission he told his disciples to teach all nations, baptizing them in the threefold Name and passing on all he had commanded them.

In the transmission of revelation in tradition, the saints play their part, and St. Agatha among them. In her native Italy, I gather, it is customary in various places for loaves of bread to be blessed on her feast. Art historians, who sometimes seem blessed with either too much imagination or too little, suggest this is a misunderstanding of the iconography which shows her holding her severed breasts in a dish. Surely the loaves of bread - whether in art or in life - portray, rather, the understanding that the lives of the martyrs, the livers of the saints, are nourishing for us. After all, the saints are living icons of the Holy Spirit of whom we say in the Creed that we believe he is 'the Giver of Life'.