

## **Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 21st 2019**

The Memorial that we universally observe today in the Catholic Church is an ancient celebration of the life of St. Agnes. As with many of the early Martyrs of the Roman Empire, there is little historical data and lots of myth that surrounds the life of a reputedly young woman who died violently because she refused marriage to a young pagan man who turned her in to the government for the crime of being a Christian. This apparently occurred late in the Third Century (c 280) when, in fact, there was a period of heightened persecution of Christians across the Roman Empire. The name Agnes is a Greek word that means “pure,” so it is certainly probable that whatever the child’s real name was, or whatever the actual circumstances of her short human life she is identified as a symbol of the Christian values of human dignity, chastity and faith in the Lordship of Jesus in the face of the cruelly licentious imperium of the Roman culture. Her name and the oral tradition about her have made her far more of a symbol than a person, but even today that can occur when the event of the killing becomes far more about values or beliefs than about the person or persons killed.

In fact, today, the United States celebrates a civil martyr in the person of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a Christian religious leader in life. He has become a symbol for fighting the evils of slavery and racism embedded in the imperium of US American culture at its darkest, in his murder which occurred even as he was speaking out for the rights and dignity of all human persons.

As a third layer of “celebration” today we honor the values of democracy and the Constitution of the United States in the peaceful inauguration of our elected civil leader on the occasion of Inauguration Day. Here too, essentially Christian values of human dignity, freedom, and civil peace are witnessed in a ceremony with both secular and religious dimensions that overtly honors both the nation and the re-elected President Obama.

In the Readings of the day – actually unrelated to any of the three layers (for US Americans, at least) of “celebration” since they are taken from the daily lectionary rather than the sanctoral cycle – we hear a text from the Book of Hebrews about the role of the High Priest in the Aaronic Tradition in relationship to Jesus’ role as High Priest par excellence, Psalm 110 – one of the great Priestly psalms, and Mark’s Gospel where Jesus is telling us that there is something new in his life and teachings that will not “work” with old ways of understanding God or “the gods.” Old cloaks with new patches and old wineskins with new wine just don’t survive.

What was new, and remains new, is that every single human person has an innate – that is “inborn” – dignity that God has granted from his own Being. No human, no employer, state or nation has the right to attempt to take away any person’s dignity, which is intimately bound with his or her human life but not limited to physical life. The Roman state did not have the right to force Agnes into a marriage she did not want. The citizens of the US do not have the right to “own” or destroy the lives and dignity of other human beings, or to consider any human person inferior and disposable because of racial characteristics, religious beliefs, gender, stage of human development, or a host of other human distinctions.

Such teaching is New Wine in the old wine skins of racial or ethnic hatred, prejudice, infanticide, female subordination, abortion, enslavement of children or adults and a host of other violations of innate human dignity that Saint Agnes and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood with Jesus against,

causing their violent deaths. We honor the radical new teaching of Jesus, as both of these heroic people did, when we lay our lives on the line against the “old” ways of DIS-valuing of human dignity that rages in the various circumstances of our day. To stand for Jesus’ teachings is to stand for justice for every person, for mercy and forgiveness of those who harm us, for human life from womb to tomb, and above all for love in the face of persecution and even death. To suffer and not to hate the persecutor, but to act with and for the dignity of every human person is the ultimate New Wine. Are WE new enough wineskins to carry such heady liquor without imploding? That might be a good meditation for Inauguration day . . . or St. Agnes Day . . . or Martin Luther King, Jr Day . . . or ANY day !

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