



St Marylebone
Parish Church

St Agatha 2021, Friday 9.30am Holy Eucharist

A martyr of the 250s in Sicily, a heroine of the Church, and here we are over 17 centuries later and all people talk about are her breasts. Little round cakes topped with cherries are shared all over Sicily and mainland Italy today. Tokens of her having been disfigured, her breasts cut off, during her martyrdom.

The other feature of St Agatha of course is that she is named in the Roman Canon. The oldest continuously used Eucharistic Rite of the Western Church. It is a Eucharistic Prayer, just like Prayer B of the C of E that we will use this morning, but its shape and form emerged from the Prayers used by the Earliest Christians. These words flow from the source of those Catacomb wall paintings of worship in the tombs on the edges of Rome. Its poetry (echoes of which we clearly hear in phrases incorporated from it into our own Book of Common Prayer in the 1500 and 1600s) is stunning, and stanza after stanza it fizzes with ancient dignity and earthy numinosity. The Roman Canon also includes great list of the Saints in Communion with whom we stand at the Lord's table and meet Him. Just before the Lord's own words of institution the priest, with hands extended offers:

“To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy Apostles and Martyrs: with John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, (Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia)

and all your Saints; admit us, we beseech you, into their company, not weighing our merits, but granting us your pardon through Christ our Lord”

It is extraordinary that this young girl from an obscure corner of the Empire is listed at the very heart of the Church’s life and being, and is there at altars all over the world in this most important of liturgical texts.

In my last parish, when it was the feast of one of the saints named in the Canon I would often use the Roman Canon in that day’s Mass as the Eucharistic Prayer. It is, admittedly rather long for a low Mass at 9am on a Saturday morning. Anne and Michael came to Mass every Saturday before their weekly shop. They were a holy pair, but liked their religion simple. I shall never forget one St Agatha’s Day using the Roman Canon, and feeling swept up in its beauty and the reality of our place at the Mass surrounded by saints and angels. Feeling rather clever and holy as the Mass ended, Anne put me right saying only, as she left church, with a smile and a gentle touch of my forearm, ‘sometimes less is more’.

I think Anne was closer to Agatha than I was that morning. A simple girl from a simple rural society, without grandeur or pretension she gave her heart, and her breasts and her body, and her life to Jesus. Because she loved Him and knew that He loved her.

In troubled times, Agatha knew her true life was hid with Christ in God. So we in our own weary and troubled times can know that as we stand here our true belonging is among the saints and angels. We can lean into the knowledge of where we really belong and in who’s company true life is to be discovered, with Agatha and Marcellinus and all the others in the scarred, strong and everlasting arms of Jesus.