

SAINT AGNES

Another aspect of the faith of the first Christians in Trastevere [Rome] was their devotion to the saints. They had created many catacombs on top of the hills which hovered over Trastevere. I think that they were, like all Romans, devoted to saint Agnes, that young Roman saint. We have discovered in the catacombs of Commodilla a painting where she is represented next to the lamb which alludes to her name. The Romans had such devotion for this saint (it is enough to see the great Constantinian basilica on Via Nomentana, subsequently reduced in size by pope Honorius) because Agnes was one of those creatures who saved the Church of Rome in a tragic time. During Valerian's persecution, which produced many *lapsi* [literally "fallen ones"], traitors to the faith, we know, from Damasus' account, that the young Agnes escaped from home to go and proclaim herself Christian in public before the tribunal. We have a letter from that period from saint Cyprian, who tells us that two priests had placed themselves on the slopes of the Campidoglio, where the *lapsi* had to go up to go and burn incense and [thus] receive the document [*libellus*] which certified that they had satisfied this imposed obligation. Well, the writer of the letter tells us that these two priests would throw themselves at the feet of the Christians who were going up, pleading that they not go, that they not commit that sin. We moreover know that the number of the *lapsi* was extraordinary. Well, in such a climate as this, where it was easy to see men and women of mature age deny God and going to burn incense to the emperor, appeared Agnes, this little girl of twelve or thirteen years (the analysis of the skull has shown she was that age) who bore witness to her faith with courage. And we can imagine what her weak voice yelling meant for everyone: "No, I am a Christian." A voice which must have resounded particularly strong for all those who had betrayed or were about to betray their faith. There is no doubt that the case of this little girl shook up the whole community. We know in effect that after her death the Church of Rome recovered [*ci fu una ripresa*], that afterwards it was one of the strongest. Umberto Maria Fasola, *Le origini cristiane a Trastevere* (Roma: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1991), p. 53. Trans. E.G. Chávez