

Barbara Longhi's *Saint Agnes of Rome*: *Iconic Images of Purity and Virtue*

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Barbara Longhi of Ravenna (1552-1638) enjoyed creating small devotional paintings depicting holy saints, in particular Saint Agnes (c. 291-304). This saint's life and martyrdom was recorded by the Bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose (339-397), a Doctor of the Church and theologian, in his book *Concerning Virgins* (374) and by Jacobus de Voragine, the Archbishop of Genoa, in his *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*, 1275). The saint's story continues to be imaged and recounted to the present day because she is an icon of a pure and virtuous adolescent female. Barbara Longhi, along with her father, Luca Longhi (1507-1580), painted several versions of Saint Agnes. In their many depictions they composed two types of images: a single—solo—image of the saint; and her presence in a group of saints—a theme known as holy conversation. In her paintings of Saint Agnes, however, Barbara Longhi preferred to depict the solo image of the saint as *virgo*, a young maiden of virtue. This essay is composed of two parts: (1) an account of the life and martyrdom of Saint Agnes; and (2) an iconographical interpretation of Barbara Longhi's *Saint Agnes of Rome*.

Keywords: Barbara and Luca Longhi, Saint Agnes, *virgo*, Christian symbolism, mannerism, Counter-Reformation Movement, Pre-Raphaelite Movement

Saint Agnes's Life and Martyrdom

In *Concerning Virgins* (*De Virginate*), Saint Ambrose introduced the life of the saint by writing:

Agnes is said of *agna*, an ewe lamb, for she was humble and debonair as a lamb, or of *agnus* [in Latin], *agne*, *hagnēin* Greek, which is to say debonair and pious, for she was debonair and merciful. Or Agnes of *agnoscendo* (knowledgeable of), for she knew the way to the truth. After this [comment] Saint Augustine said: truth is opposed [or] against vanity, falseness, and deception, for these three things were taken from her for the truth that she [believed]. (Ambrose, 1843/2013, Chapter 2, on Saint Agnes of Rome).

In his preface, Saint Ambrose continued, noting:

This blessed Saint Agnes despised the delights of noblesse, and desired heavenly dignity; she left the desires of human's fellowship, and she found the fellowship of the everlasting divine King [Christ]. And receiving a precious death when confessing her faith for Jesus Christ [refusing to renounce her beliefs], she reigned with joy in Heaven... This was the faith of this glorious virgin Saint Agnes, who suffered martyrdom, and death for Christ.¹

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¹ Saint Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins* or *De Virginate*, written in 374 and first published in 388, Chapter 2. In 1843, Albany J. Christies translated the text into English. This edition was reprinted by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform in 2013.

In the *Golden Legend*, Jacobus de Voragine focused on her personality and also on her martyrdom.²

She was fair of visage, but much fairer in the Christian faith, she was young of age, and aged in wit, for in the thirteenth year of her age she lost the death that the world giveth, and found life in Jesus Christ.

The son of the prefect of Rome loved her but she refused him. When the prefect of Rome heard that she was Christian, he was very glad to have power over her, for then the Christian people were in the will of the lord, and if they would not deny their God and their belief all their goods should be forfeited. Wherefore then the prefect of Rome made Saint Agnes to come in justice and he examined her sweetly, and after cruelly by menaces.

Then the judge made to take off her clothes, and all naked to be led to the brothel. But God gave to her such grace that the hairs of her head became so long that they covered all her body to her feet, so that her body was not seen. And when she entered into the brothel she found the angel of God ready to defend her against men. The son of the prefect of Rome went to the brothel to take the virgin, and the devil took him by the throat and strangled him that he fell down dead...But an angelic intervention restored his life. Nonetheless, the father cursed Saint Agnes as a sorceress and condemned her to death. His lieutenant Aspasius killed her with his sword and so she was martyred.³ (Voragine, 1483, 2:109)

Saint Agnes was born in Rome in 291 and raised in a Christian family. Agnes was young, very beautiful, and witty, and belonged to a wealthy Roman family; hence she was pursued for marriage by many rich men. But Agnes had promised God that she would never lose her chastity, since she considered herself a mystical bride of Jesus Christ.

However, she lived during the time of Emperor Diocletian (r. 284-305), a time of persecution of Christians during the Roman Empire. An angry suitor, Procopius, son of the Roman Counselor, Prefect Sempronius, accused her of being a Christian and brought her to his father's tribunal in order that she be castigated according to Roman law. In an effort to persuade her to marry his son and renounce her Christian beliefs, Sempronius showered her with many wonderful gifts and jewels, but Agnes refused them. He then offered her an opportunity to save her life by becoming a Vestal Virgin and worshipping the pagan virgin goddess Vesta, known as the Roman Goddess of Hearth. Agnes again refused. As these approaches failed, Sempronius started employing harsher actions to make her change her mind. He had her hands and feet chained but miraculously the chains came unshackled. Then, he had her placed in a brothel. There, another miracle occurred: An angel covered her body with a veil and blinded her pursuers to protect her from molestation.

² Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, online 2:109:

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume2.asp#Agnes> (accessed on 15 March 2022); Jacobus de Voragine, "Saint Agnes, Virgin", *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, with an Introduction by Eamon Duffy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 101-104. Also translated in the Renaissance by William Caxton (1483, Chapter 2, p. 109). This edition was edited by F. S. Ellis for Temple Classics (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1900, reprinted 1922, 1931). For the life of the saint, see also *Breviarium Romanum: Ex decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini Restitutum* (Rome: Typis Vaticanis, 1632), pp. 800-804, and 815, <https://archive.org/details/p1breviariumroma00cathuoft> (accessed on 15 March 2022); *Acta Sanctorum*, John Bolland, ed., 65 vols. (Brussels, 1643-1925). The Christian Iconography website has references to the following volumes of the *Acta Sanctorum: Omnis ignis extinctus est, ut nec tepor quidem incendii remaneret* (July 2015), Vol. 2, pp. 350-363, esp. 351-353 (accessed on 15 March 2022); and Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, Carmen XIV, available online in the Latin original at The Latin Library, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/prud.html> (accessed on 15 March 2022). For an English translation, see H. J. Thomson, *Prudentius*, 2 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1856), on Saint Agnes, Vol. 2, <https://archive.org/details/prudentius00pruduoft/page/n9/mode/2up> (accessed on 15 March 2022); Louis André Delastre, *Saint Agnes*, trans. Rosemary Seed (London: Macmillan, 1962); Carolyn Diskat-Muir, "St. Agnes of Rome as a Bride of Christ: A Northern European Phenomenon, c. 1450-1520", *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 31(3) (2004-2005), 134-155; A. Butler, *The Lives of the Saints*, ed. H. Thurston and D. Attwater, 4 vols. (1956; repr., London: Burnes & Oates, 1981), Vol. 1, p. 136, notes.

³ Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, online 2:109.

Another interpretation of the legend claims that the Prefect Sempronius condemned the young maiden to be dragged naked through the streets of Rome and then be placed in a brothel. But Agnes was once more protected. As she was forced to parade in the nude, her hair grew instantly, covering her entire body, hence avoiding further humiliation. Eventually, Agnes was sentenced to death. First, she was tied to a stake but miraculously the faggots or wood sticks would not burn, and the flames of those that ignited drew away from her body (Bolland ed., 1643-1925, 2:350-363, esp. 351-353). This prompted further anger among her executioners, in particular Aspasius, an officer who furiously drew his dagger to stab her in the throat; in other retellings, he drew a sword to sever her head. In witnessing this evil action, Agnes started praying and bowed her head waiting for the executioner's blow. She died, decapitated, as virgin-martyr at the age of 12 or 13 on 21 January 304 (Réau, 2000, 2:108-114).

Another myth about this holy saint claims that, after her martyrdom, Agnes was interred in a catacomb outside the Roman walls. Today the site is called the Catacomb of Saint Agnes claiming that this is her original burial site and that her bones are located here (Figure 1) (Cianetti & Pavolini, 2004). In the fourth century, years after Saint Agnes's death, the pagan Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306-337) converted to Christianity, and after the pleas of his daughter, Constantina or Costanza, Emperor Constantine permitted the building of a church in honor of Saint Agnes above the site of this catacomb. Costanza suffered from an infectious disease, leprosy, but after visiting and praying for a cure at the site of Saint Agnes's catacomb, she was miraculously healed. As a thankful gesture, she promised to have a church built in the saint's honor.

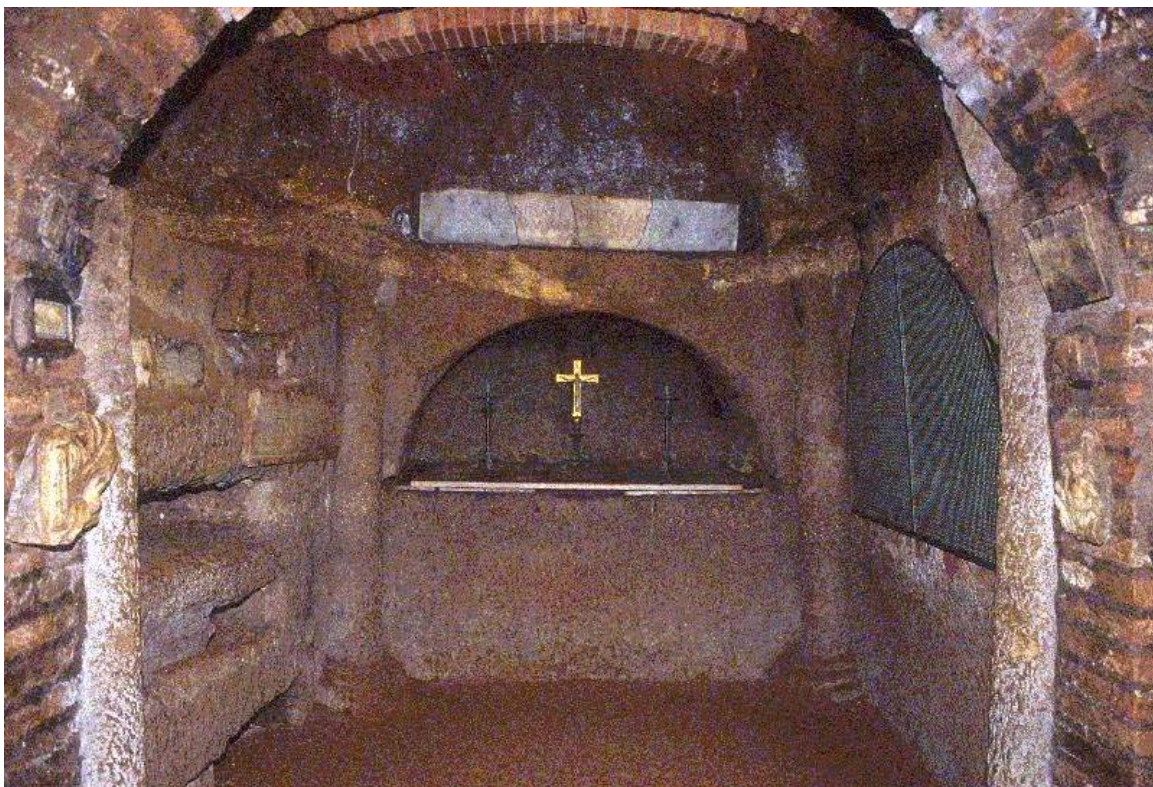


Figure 1. Catacomb of Saint Agnes, Outside the Walls, Rome.



Figure 2. Saint Agnes, 625, apse end, main altar, restored mosaic.
Church of Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, Rome.

Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, now the oldest Roman church, was built over the burial site. Below the altar of the church rest the bones of the saint. Over the years, this church has undergone many repairs and changes (Cianetti & Pavolini, 2004, Introduction). One major transformation was during the reign of Pope Honorius I (r. 625-638) in the seventh century. Despite the many alterations, the mosaic of Saint Agnes (Figure 2) is still visible in the apse end of the main altar. The graceful figure of Saint Agnes stands vertically as a Byzantine icon, a haloed figure floating on a background of golden tesserae. She is dressed in a royal regalia and crowned as a princess, referencing her noble birth as a Roman patrician. The figure holds a rolled-up parchment, a symbol of her divine knowledge and testament to her martyrdom. Only the red flames around the platform on which she stands recall one aspect of her martyrdom, when she was placed at the stake and the

faggots would not burn because the flames dissipated in the wind. Curiously, on the lower part of her mantle there is a round medallion that seems to depict an animal that looks like a bird. It may be that this is a poor mosaic decoration of an ewe lamb, the attribute associated with her name, *agnus*, but this name is also a Christian liturgical reference to Christ as *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God, John 1:29-31), the sacrificial lamb for the redemption and salvation of humankind.

Visual Sources for Saint Agnes of Rome

There are conflicting aspects of the story about the life of Saint Agnes when comparing the recounted events by Saint Ambrose and Jacobus de Voragine; however, these discrepancies are not the quest of this essay. What is agreed is that, at the age of 12 (292-304 CE), Saint Agnes was punished, first by being placed in a brothel and then martyred for her Christian devotion and refusal to sacrifice to idols during the Diocletian persecutions of 284 to 305 CE in Rome (Diskat-Muir, 2004-2005, pp. 134-155; Butler, 1956/1981, 1:136). The cult of the saint was well established in Ravenna from the time of the foundation of the church of Saint Agnes there in 470 by Gemellus, a wealthy devotee of the saint in Ravenna (Herrin, 2020, p. 75). In Christian iconography, her traditional symbols are the palm frond and white ewe lamb, and sometimes also a crown, a sword, and white dress, or a flaming pyre (Hall, 1974, p. 10). The visual imagery of Saint Agnes has varied through time, because artists select aspects of their subject to fit with their patron's request or with their personal spirituality.

In her solo depictions of saints, Longhi was influenced not only by her father's images but also by the religious culture in Ravenna (Herrin, 2020, introduction, pp. 1-13). Other impacts on her art included the Byzantine tradition visualized in the mosaic cycles of the Basilicas of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and Sant'Apollinare in Classe, the Basilica of San Vitale, the Chapel of Saint Andrew (the Archbishop's Chapel), and other religious structures, as well as ancient Roman imagery seen in reliefs, sarcophagi, and sculptures. Although Saint Catherine of Alexandria was her favorite saint to portray, Longhi also painted images of the mystic Saint Cecilia, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Dominic, and Saint Agnes of Rome.

Longhi depicted two compositional versions of Saint Agnes: one kneeling and another standing. An example of the first version is her *Forli Saint Agnes of Rome*, c. 1580, oil on canvas, now part of the Intesa Sanpaolo Collection in the Cassa dei Risparmi at Forli (Figure 3), while her *Ravenna Saint Agnes of Rome*, 1635, oil on canvas, in the Canonica della Cattedrale in Ravenna, is an example of the second (Figure 4) (Viroli, 2000, pp. 189-190; Simoni, 1999, pp. 59-72, esp. 69; 2000, pp. 209-214, esp. 212).

Longhi's *Forli Saint Agnes* is most inventive. Here, the saint is depicted kneeling down in a pew where she rests her arms, one holding a palm frond, a symbol of Christian martyrdom. She is accompanied by a white ewe lamb, another attribute of her virtue. Creatively, Longhi has designed her mantle to wrap around her body and also envelop and protect the gentle animal, the lamb. The saint is crowned spiritually and physically with a golden halo, alluding to her holiness and her royal birth. Following the contours of her head, a coiffure of braided tresses is embellished by a blue ribbon whose center holds a golden brooch similar to the brooch on her shoulder. The background behind the figure is difficult to discern; a blue ribbon seems to encircle a pole, probably alluding to one of the versions of her martyrdom. After her trial she was sentenced to death and tied to a stake to burn, but miraculously the flames parted and she was unharmed, but then an angry Roman officer severed her head with his sword. The purple-blueish color is associated with the color of a violet flower, a symbol of suffering (Metford, 1983, p. 256).



Figure 3. Barbara Longhi, *Saint Agnes of Rome*, c. 1580, oil on canvas. Cassa dei Risparmi, Forli. Intesa Sanpaolo Collection.

Photo credit: Archive, Art, Culture and Historical Heritage, Head Office Department, Intesa Sanpaolo.



Figure 4. Barbara Longhi, *Ravenna Saint Agnes of Rome*, 1635, oil on canvas. Canonica della Cattedrale, Ravenna.
Photo credit: Bridgemanimages.com.

The linking of the lamb with Saint Agnes was first visualized in a mosaic cycle of holy women, dating to 547-561 CE, on the frieze wall in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (Herrin, 2020, pp. 192-198). This mosaic depicts a procession of women, a visualization of a verse from the Book of Revelations (7:9), "The holy saints or martyrs were wearing white robes holding palm branches in their hands" (Figures 5 and 6). In this wall mosaic, the saint's name, Saint Agnes, appears in an inscription above her head, and she is accompanied by a white lamb, placed at her feet. In the princely procession of holy women, Saint Agnes walks holding a crown as an offering for the enthroned Virgin Mary. The saint's coiffure is decorated with a pearl diadem (Kirschbaum, 1968-1976, 1:36, n. 11).



Figure 5. *Female Procession Toward Enthroned Madonna and Child*, 547-561 CE, mosaic.
Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.



Figure 6. Saint Agnes, det., *Female Procession Toward Enthroned Madonna and Child*, 547-561 CE, mosaic.
Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.

Longhi appropriated many of these details in her painting while making her own artistic changes. For example, the pearl diadem became a golden and purple-blueish adornment in Saint Agnes's coiffure, while the standing figure in the mosaic is depicted as a kneeling in the painting, with the lamb tucked under her right veil.

In Longhi's painting, the accentuation of the figure's breasts and the unusual green veil over her shoulder, pinned with a brooch to her dress, may allude to the punitive period in the brothel and the miraculous protection she received there. Whenever a suitor tried to sexually pursue the saint in the brothel, an angel would cover her with a veil of shining light so powerful that it would destroy the seducer, protecting her virginity and saving the saint from other sexual abuses.

It was not common in 16th-century Italian religious painting to portray Saint Agnes alone and as a portrait image. Traditionally, she was depicted in the theme of holy conversation (*sacra conversazione*), as seen in a polyptych of Saint Agnes by the Florentine Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530). This work was a commission for the church of Saint Agnes in Pisa between 1528 and 1530 (Figure 7). The polyptych in oil on panel contains images of Saints John the Baptist, Peter, Catherine of Siena, Margaret, and Saint Agnes. At present, the central panel is missing. In 1618 the panels of this polyptych were dismantled and moved from the church of Saint Agnes to the church of Santa Maria Assunta, the cathedral of Pisa (Freedberg, 1963, 1:Cat. 86, 190-193). The panel at the bottom of this altarpiece represents Saint Agnes in the company of other saints, although the painting's subject is a variance from the theme of holy conversation. The large single panel of Saint Agnes depicts a young maiden seated on a marble bench inside a loggia. Through its opening a landscape shows the hills of Pisa with a church, perhaps the old church of Saint Agnes where the altarpiece was originally to be placed. The saint is depicted with the traditional halo, palm frond, and a lamb. Her creamy white attire, a symbol of her innocence and purity, is similar in color to the lamb's wool, hence matching both her name and attribute. What is unusual about del Sarto's interpretation of the saint is that his depiction is of a very young female with a jovial aspect expressed in her facial features, and the depiction of the palm frond as a closed bud, which suggests the early stage of the plant's growth. Another inventive feature is del Sarto's treatment of the saint's hairdo, coiled tresses inside a veil, which functions as a child's bonnet, a contrast to the traditional depiction of long and loose hair in a young maiden (Cobb-Stevens, 1993, pp. 311-340), as seen in Lavinia Fontana's *Saint Agnes* of 1611-1614, in the Rivaldi Chapel in the church of Santa Maria della Pace in Rome (compare Figures 7 and 8) (Barnaba & Bertorello, 2016).⁴

In this oil marble or slate painting of *Saint Agnes*, Fontana depicted a version of the saint according to Roman iconography, where the holy figure symbolically represents a spiritual bride of Christ (Figure 8). Fontana painted a young woman, kneeling down and immersed in prayer, with her head and eyes turned toward Heaven and her hands joined together in meditation. A ewe lamb stands next to her, a traditional attribute for the saint's qualities of gentleness and purity as well as associated with her name (Réau, 2000, 2:109). The saint is dressed in a white chemise resembling a wedding gown, alluding to her spiritual connection with Christ as a holy bride. The white dress is also similar to the white vestment or alb (from the Latin *alba*, meaning white) worn by priests underneath the chasuble when performing the Mass, hence connecting her with the church of Christ. In Fontana's *Saint Agnes*, the saint is painted with long, loose tresses that recall the legend where she refused to deny her Christian faith. Forced to parade nude throughout the streets of Rome, miraculously her hair began to grow, immediately covering her whole body (Réau, 2000, 2:110, 112).

⁴ Caterina Barnaba and Carla Bertorello, *I Dipinti ad olio su muro del Passignano nella Cappella Rivaldi in Santa Maria della Pace in Rome*, Publication and Presentation XIV Congresso Nazionale IGIIC—Lo Stato dell'Arte—Accademia Di Belle Arte di L'Aquila—L'Aquila 20/22 Ottobre 2016, in particular, Figures 1 and 2 with the Fontana's holy saints on the pilasters. See <https://cbcoop.it/app/uploads/2017/06/Barnaba-Bertorello-abstract-testo-e-foto-2.pdf> (accessed on 15 March 2022); Réau, *Iconografia del arte cristiano*, 2:109-111.

Longhi depicted a different imagery than that of del Sarto and Fontana. Her version is designed as a bust length portrait of a beautiful woman gazing at the viewer (compare Figures 3 and 7-8). The attributes of the saint are included—the palm frond and lamb—but the painting lacks the expression of spirituality found in Fontana's painting or the youthfulness found in del Sarto's. Longhi's bust length composition reveals more an affinity with Paolo Veronese's *Portrait of a Lady as Saint Agnes* of 1580s, oil on canvas, now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas (Figures 3 and 9).



Figure 7. Andrea del Sarto, *Saint Agnese*, 1528-1530, det., oil panel, dismantled altarpiece from the Church of Saint Agnes, Pisa. Now in Santa Maria Assunta, Cathedral of Pisa.



Figure 8. Lavinia Fontana, *Saint Agnes*, 1611-1614, lateral pilaster, right side, oil on marble.
Main Chapel Cappella Rivaldi, Santa Maria della Pace, Rome.

Veronese's *Portrait of a Lady as Saint Agnes* depicts a Venetian woman dressed in her finest in an interior room (Figure 9). The figure is seated in front of a window, through which a beautiful blue skyline is seen. Inside the room a dramatic golden curtain frames her and acts as cloth of honor, praising the unknown maiden as well as the saint. The figure is enveloped in a gold brocade mantle with lily and acanthus designs which covers her blue dress, with a white laced veil around her shoulder. Nestled in her lap is a ewe lamb that turns his head toward the chest of the maiden, where a crucifix is set in the center of her garment's bustline. The placement of the lamb viewing the crucifix is not accidental: Veronese is alluding to not only the identification of the figure as Saint Agnes, since her name refers to lamb (Latin for *agnus*), but also to Christian iconography, where the name alludes to Christ as the Lamb of God (the *Agnus Dei*, John 1:29-31). An example can be seen in a Medieval manuscript of the 13th century where a haloed Saint Agnes, accompanied by her haloed lamb, embraces a wooden crucifix with the crucified image of Christ. While standing in a niche in front of a red floral

tapestry, dressed in her finest with an ermine fur cape, she points to the crucifix, reminding the reader or viewer of her devotion for the Lamb of God (Figure 13, Folio 96, Manuscript illumination No. 16251, Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris). Here the image of the crucifix is a reference to Christ's suffering and death, emulated by His faithful devotee Saint Agnes. In Veronese's painting, the open prayer book with an unclear text, placed perpendicular to the crucifix in the figure's garment, may contain the passage in John 1:29, or perhaps allude further to the Christian devotion of this Venetian woman. The inclusion of flowers in the form of a rose bush in front of the window and the lilies in the mantle refer to the saint's love and suffering as well as to her purity of heart and body, virtues to be emulated by the sitter.



Figure 9. Paolo Veronese, *Portrait of a Lady as Saint Agnes*, 1580, oil on canvas. Museum of fine Arts, Houston, Texas.

Credit Line: Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation in Houston, Texas.

Photo credit: Alamy.com.

Perhaps Longhi, like Veronese, depicted a real person in her portrayal of the saint. If so, Longhi's *Forli Saint Agnes* of 1580 (Figure 3) may be considered not only a portrayal of a female saint but also a portrait of real person, because of the natural and distinctive physiognomy of the image, revealing a unique individual. Unfortunately, very little is known about Longhi's models and patronage (Viroli, 2000, pp. 189-190; Cheney, 1988, pp. 16-21; 1994-2000; Cheney, Faxon, & Russo, 2000/2009, Introduction, pp. xxi-xxvi, 42-66; Ceroni,

1994; 2007; Simone, 2000, pp. 209-214, esp. 212), unlike some of her Saint Catherine's paintings, where some can be considered portraits of herself (Cheney, 1988, pp. 16-21; Simoni, 2013, pp. 71-74, esp. 73, n. 8; Cheney, 2022, pp. 17-37). Whether or not she was familiar with the paintings of del Sarto, Fontana, or Veronese, Longhi's *Saint Agnes* is original in its composition and interpretation of a holy figure, fitting within the spirituality and repertoire of Saint Agnes's depiction in Italian religious art of the 16th-century.

In the *Ravenna Saint Agnes* (Figure 4), Longhi depicted a standing figure in a contrapposto stance similar to the stance, but flipped, of Michelangelo's *David* of 1501-1504, now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence (compare Figures 4 and 10). Undoubtedly, Longhi was also familiar with the newly discovered Roman relief of the Julio-Claudians Augustus and Livia. This original marble fragment was found near the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (425-450) in the 16th century, and is now in the National Archeological Museum of Ravenna (Figure 11) (Viroli, 2000, p. 197, referring to a Venus-type).⁵ In the relief, a clothed Venus Genetrix (or Livia) stands in a contrapposto stance next to Emperor Augustus. She bends her arm close to her chest to hold on to her mantle and offering; these same gestures, along with the treatment of the drapery, are seen in Longhi's *Ravenna Saint Agnes*. She raises her right hand close to her heart while holding the palm frond, an attribute of her martyrdom, while her left hand holds the folds of her garment (compare Figures 4 and 11).

In Longhi's painting, Saint Agnes, dressed in a long red dress partially covered by an orange shawl that wraps around her figure, turns to address something outside the picture plane (Figure 4). Her bent head is a quotation from Longhi's earlier painting, *Judith With the Head of Holofernes*, 1575-1580, oil on canvas mounted on panel, held in the Pinacoteca Comunale, Ravenna (Figure 12) (Fabbri, 2007, pp. 92-94; Simone, 2000, p. 213). Between her feet, the lamb rests on the hem of her dress, while across, behind her mantle, a dagger (sword) refers to aspects of her torture (Figure 4) (Réau, 2000, 2:112). Here is a drastic contrast of elements: the lamb representing the gentle nature of Agnes, and the dagger, alluding to her brutal death. Longhi designed the saint standing heroically on a platform as a trophy of valor, contrasting with strange flames of fire, similar to fringes, placed along the edge of the platform. This allusion is to another aspect of her persecution, when she was placed in a bonfire, the flames dissipating without touching her. The red color of the flames is similar to the color of her dress, both referring to her sacrifice and spiritual victory.

There are other examples of portraits of Saint Agnes, probably painted during Barbara's late period, likely between 1624 and 1638. In these works, the saint is depicted in a rectangular frame as part of the composition of aside panel of an altarpiece or triptych, for example, the dismantled panel of Barbara's 1635 *Ravenna Saint Agnes* (Figure 4) (Viroli, 2000, p. 197; Viroli & Ceroni, 1992, pp. 92-94; Simoni, 1999, p. 6, fig. 3; Simoni, 2000, p. 213),⁶ and *Saint Agnes of Montepulciano* and *Saint Dominic* of 1635-1638, once placed on the pilasters of the deconsecrated church of San Domenico (Viroli, 2000, pp. 214-215; Voragine, 1900, p. 82, for the life of Saint Dominic). It is also worth noting that the church of San Domenico in Ravenna, with its adjacent monastery (convent), was established in the 13th century. During the 16th century, this church was Longhi's parish and its surrounding cemetery was the burial site of her family and eventually of herself as noted in her two last wills and testaments.⁷

⁵ John Polini has discussed this Roman relief as part of an altar or monument depicting the Julio-Claudian dynasty or the Emperor Augustus and his wife Livia. See: <https://jcreliefs22.wordpress.com/2011/03/24/the-julio-claudian-ravenna-relief-joe-geranio/> (accessed on 15 March 2022).

⁶ Probably the panel was touched up or copied after Barbara's death in 1638.

⁷ The Archive of the State of Ravenna, Selected Testaments, Folder No. 18, Notary public Angelico Tavella, unnumbered (in pencil 11.7.1630], translated for the first time in English by Liana De Girolami Cheney (24 April 2019).

Unfortunately, in the 18th century the building was renovated and later deconsecrated; today it functions as a gallery-museum. Presently, the panel of *Saint Agnes of Montepulciano* is not displayed or lost.⁸ Longhi's imagery of *Saint Agnes of Montepulciano* is problematic. In viewing the image in a photograph published by Viroli (2000, p. 215), some general observations can be considered. The Dominican abbess (1268-1317) and mystic is dressed in nun's habit, holding a lily branch with a crucifix and loaves of breads to feed the poor (Réau, 2000, 2:107-108). Of note in this imagery, this Dominican nun of Tuscan birth is not holding the traditional attribute of a lamb but instead she carries a Rosary in her hand.



Figure 10. Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504, marble, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

⁸ Correspondence on 3 February 2022 with Dr. Gianni Careddu of the Photographic Archive of Saint Dominic in Ravenna confirms that the painting is no longer in the church.



Figure 11. Livia and Augustus, from Julio-Claudian Relief, det., 37-41 CE, marble.
National Archeological Museum, Ravenna.
Photo credit: Joe Geranio and John Polini.



Figure 12. Barbara Longhi, *Judith With the Head of Holofernes*, 1575-1580, oil on canvas mounted on panel.
Pinacoteca Comunale, Ravenna.



Figure 13. *Saint Agnes of Rome With a Crucifix*, 13th century.

Folio 96, manuscript illumination, 16251, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Conclusion

Longhi's paintings of Saint Agnes reflect the sentiments of the Counter-Reformation Movement and the emphasis of didactic imagery for the faithful to be spiritually moved, as indicated by the pious expressions of the figures. Their full-length depictions are created to impress and underline the significance of their holiness to the viewer. Psychologically, the devotee observes, admires, and is inspired through the imagery of the saints' faithful accomplishments. However, with these large paintings, the devotee does not interact in an intimate and personal manner as with the earlier, smaller paintings like the *Forli Saint Agnes of Rome* (Figure 3). These images are less private interlocation and devotion between the image and the devotee but are, rather, more iconic images for general meditation and praying.

In the *Roman Breviary*, revised after the Council of Trent and published in 1568, Saint Agnes of Rome along with Saint Catherine of Alexandria was retained and remembered in the liturgy as historically reliable saints, while other saints such as Saint Barbara, Saint Cecilia, and Saint Ursula were rarely mentioned (Pippo, 2020). Furthermore, Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), a Doctor of Civil and Canon Law and Italian Archbishop of Bologna, was a great contributor to the Christian reformations of the Church during the Council of Trent. In 1582, he wrote in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* on the merits of painting for a Christian individual, among which are to not only create art that imitates the natural world but also art that imitates for the glory of God ([*l'individuo*] *Cristiano aquista insieme un'altra nobile forma... oltre l'assomigliare nella pittura... ad fine maggiore, mirando la eterna gloria*) (Barocchi, 1961, 2:119-515, esp. 211, quoting Paleotti, 2012). He commented on the painter who depicted portraits of holy figures employing him or herself as the model, noting that “the likeness should be of a good and intelligent person revealing the nature of devotion” (*l'effigie propia... buona et intelligente... porta probabile apparenza*) (Barocchi, 1961, 2:352, quoting Paleotti, 2012). However, he also cautioned the artist not to compose a saint's portrait using a model who might depict an effigy of a commoner or frivolous person (*persona mondana*) well known by others (“dagli altri conosciute”) because it would be considered to be a shameful action (*cosa indignissima*) (Barocchi, 1961, 2:352, quoting Paleotti, 2012; O'Malley, 2012, pp. 28-48).

Perhaps Longhi and her family, residing in Ravenna, far away from Trent but close to Bologna, were aware of this mandate. With the depiction of herself as the honorific female saints in the paintings of *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* of 1589, oil on canvas, in the Pinacoteca Comunale of Ravenna, and *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* of c. 1590, oil on canvas, in the Museo Canoniale of Verona (Cheney, 2022, pp. 17-37; 1988, pp. 16-21) as well as with the portrayals of *Forli Saint Agnes of Rome* and *Ravenna Saint Agnes of Rome*, Longhi, directly or indirectly, was responding to aims of the Council of Trent's decrees and Archbishop Paleotti's position of creating art for the glory of God. Thus, her imaging of a saint followed this prescript of a moral and mindful individual, a devoted daughter, and a faithful Christian. This type of religious imagery assisted the devotee, in this instance Longhi, the painter, to visually represent a favorite female saint and emulate the martyrdom experience of victory. The Council decree urged

religious leaders to diligently teach the Bible along with meaning of the stories and mysteries of redemption in order to be portrayed in paintings and other representations. The depiction of all holy images with their visualization should provide recollections (*memoria*) and spiritual arousal (*exitatio*). (Schroeder, 1978, p. 216)

These experiences (*exitatio*) would then move viewers “to adore and love God and cultivate piety” (Schroeder, 1978; Bosch, 2020, pp. 37-51).

Coda

Representations of Saint Agnes became popular in centuries to follow, in particular in the 19th century with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement by artists and poets. The British poet-philosopher John Keats (1795-1821) wrote a romantic poem entitled *The Eve of Saint Agnes*. It was first published as *Lamia, Isabella and the Eve of Saint Agnes* in 1819, and later in a collection of poems entitled *Other Poems* in 1820. Following the Medieval legend of a persecuted young virgin and martyr of the fourth century in Rome, who later became the patron saint of virgins, Keats tells a quixotic story about a damsel who followed a ritual on the eve of Saint Agnes (January 20). The young maiden desired to have a vision of her future husband undertook a ritual which consisted of

fasting, sleeping unclothed, placing her hands beneath her pillow, and reciting the Lord's Prayer while gazing only to the sky, hoping that in this dream her true love would appear, kiss her, and feast with her. Pre-Raphaelite painters moved by Keats's verses composed paintings such as John Everett Millais's *Eve of Saint Agnes* of 1863 (De Lisle, 1904, p. 182), oil on canvas, now in the Royal Collection in London (Figure 14), and Arthur Hughes's *The Eve of Saint Agnes* of 1856, oil on canvas, now at the Tate Britain in London.⁹

Edward Burne-Jones was another Pre-Raphaelite painter inspired by Keats. However, he preferred to represent the image of Agnes as a traditional *virgo* saint, including the traditional Christian attributes of the ewe lamb veiled long tresses, but added a prayer book, as seen in his *Saints Barbara, Dorothea, and Agnes* of 1869, oil on canvas, now in London in a Private Collection (Figure 15).¹⁰ In this painting, Burne-Jones depicted both physical and metaphysical realms. The physical realm is depicted with the holy figures holding their respective attributes associated with their martyrdoms in the defense of their virginal virtue. This trio resides in an open loggia, standing on a checkboard marble floor. A long marble parapet separates the loggia from a vast landscape seen beyond it. This emerald green area, simulating a precious garden, alludes to a metaphysical realm, an earthly paradise. The pillar stance, attributes, attire, and gestures of these holy figures suggest that they are custodians of this sacred place, implying as well that they are guardians of their virginity. In addition to the attributes held by these holy figures, Burne-Jones incorporates his own artistic sensibility and interpretation about the saints' lives, in particular that of Saint Agnes. He framed the loggia with a tall red vase with red roses next to Saint Barbara, and placed a red shawl on the parapet next to Saint Agnes. The color red alludes to their martyrdom, as roses are a traditional symbol of love and pain and the vase is a symbol of sacrifice (2 Corinthian 4:7) and the female repository of life (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 1061). The red shawl on the parapet alludes to the angelic veil that covered Saint Agnes's body and preventing suitors from molesting her in the brothel. In depicting her long tresses covered by a veil, Burne-Jones refers to another divine intervention, when the saint's hair started to grow, immediately covering her body when she was compelled to parade naked throughout the streets of Rome.

Burne-Jones's painting was originally purchased by William Graham (1817-1885), one of Burne-Jones's most devoted patrons. Earlier, in 1866, Burne-Jones had composed designs and cartoons of these saints for the stained-glass window project of the east of window of all Saints Church in Cambridge.¹¹ Almost 300 years after Longhi's time, Burne-Jones's depiction of *Saint Agnes* retains the similar essence of spirituality and Christian symbolism found in the imagery of Longhi's *Saint Agnes*.

⁹ For the image, see: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/13/Arthur_Hughes_-_The_Eve_of_St_Agnes_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (accessed on 15 March 2022).

¹⁰ See provenance's history and iconography, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/victorian-pre-raphaelite-british-impressionist-art/sir-edward-coley-burne-jones-bt-a-r-a-r-w-s-st> (accessed on 15 March 2022).

¹¹ See provenance's history and iconography, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/victorian-pre-raphaelite-british-impressionist-art/sir-edward-coley-burne-jones-bt-a-r-a-r-w-s-st> (accessed on 15 March 2022).



Figure 14. John Everett Millais, *Eve of Saint Agnes* of 1863, oil on canvas, Royal Collection, London.
Royal Collection Trust© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2000.



Figure 15. Edward Burne-Jones, *Saints Barbara, Dorothea, and Agnese*, oil on canvas.
Private Collection, London.
Photo credit: Sotheby's London.

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