

## REASONS TO READ THE LIFE OF ST. AGNES

Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Saint Agnes of Montepulciano*. Translated by Sr. Mary Martin Jacobs, O.P. Summit, NJ: DNS Publications, 2012.

**B**lessed Raymond of Capua has long been known as the confessor and biographer of St. Catherine of Siena. But before he became counselor to the seraphic virgin Catherine, he wrote a biography of St. Agnes of Montepulciano, a Dominican nun of remarkable sanctity. Sr. Mary Martin Jacobs, O.P., of the Monastery of the Holy Rosary in Summit, New Jersey, recently published the first English translation of this work. The language of the translation preserves the mystique of medieval Latin without being archaic or tiresome. The fact that this little work of Dominican hagiography is now available in English after 650 years might be reason enough to read it. However, for those who are not well acquainted with Raymond of Capua or the Dominican nuns, I will offer a few more reasons to crack this charming paperback, some serious and some whimsical.

### ACQUIRE A TASTE FOR MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

**T**his little work immediately transports one into the world of medieval hagiography. Truth be told, this can result in a slight culture shock. As Sr. Donna Marie of the Roses points out in the introduction: “Today proof of sanctity resides more in the rigor of the process of verification and the credentials of the persons attesting to their truth and value, than in the number of reports gathered.” Our modern, critical ears thrive on cold, scientific facts. By contrast, Raymond offers in this biography a plethora of

fantastical miracles that stretch our imaginations. Let it be known, however, that Raymond carefully cites his sources and takes pains to ground the many marvels he recounts on personal testimony.

If one approaches this work with an open mind, it offers a chance to enjoy an earlier age when spiritual edification was produced through stories of miracle after miracle. Demonic crows taunt Agnes; she levitates; she multiplies bread; she exorcizes the possessed; and her body remains perfectly incorrupt after death—just to name a few. Her signature miracle, the raining down of a snow-like manna upon her veil while at prayer, she zealously guarded as one of the Lord's special favors. On one occasion, when a sister tried to shake her veil free of the "snow," she responded: "Enough, daughter, enough. Do not take away from me what has been delightfully given to me by the divine sweetness."

In short, this work invites the reader to enter a world where the quantity of miracles bespeaks a quality all its own. With the proper disposition, the modern reader will not only be charmed, but also strengthened in faith.

#### SEE ST. DOMINIC CONTEND WITH STS. FRANCIS AND AUGUSTINE

While the number of miracles and visions given to Agnes is surely impressive, the unique, edifying, and entertaining types of miracles recorded offer another incentive to *tolle et lege*. For example, in one miraculous vision, Agnes seemed to be out at sea with three ships before her, each one piloted by a different religious founder: St. Dominic, St. Francis, and St. Augustine. Raymond recounts:

Each of them wished to draw the holy virgin to his ship, and especially Blessed Francis, who alleged that the habit which she at that time wore agreed totally with the habit of his sisters. After a long argument, Dominic, the glorious athlete of God, said to his companions: "It will not be as you say, but she will stay in my ship, because thus has the

almighty Lord arranged.” And extending his hand he drew her and brought her into his ship, and the ships and the patrons disappeared.

This vision came at a time when Agnes was unsure whether to found a second monastery in Montepulciano. This holy pirate-battle vision confirmed that she was to pave the way for the Order of Preachers in Montepulciano.

WATCH ST. AGNES PLAY TUG-OF-WAR  
WITH THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

While the former story may offend some pious ears, another vision surely surpasses it. This time the contenders are not mendicant founders, but Agnes and the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the feast of the Assumption, Agnes prayed that the Blessed Virgin might show her Jesus. Mary appeared with the child Jesus and invited Agnes to embrace him. Unfortunately Agnes was slow in giving him back:

When the Queen of Heaven had thus endured the absence of her Son for the space of an hour or so as a consolation to Agnes, wishing to put an end to the vision she began to ask Agnes not to be slow to return her Son to her. But Agnes shook her head vigorously, asserting that she could not be separated from such a sweet Spouse . . . The very Mother of God, grasping her Son in her hands, tried to pull him to herself with a kind of holy violence.

When St. Agnes realized she was going to lose the battle, she snatched a little wooden cross from Jesus’ neck. Though she lost the tug-of-war, she won this relic.



ITALIAN SCHOOL- ST. AGNES OF MONTEPULCIANO

## COMPARE ST. AGNES AND ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

With Sr. Mary Martin's new translation, English speakers now have a chance for a little scientific saint study. Raymond's life of Catherine of Siena has long been available in English. Nearly all of the conditions of both works are the same: they have the same author and are both biographies of 14th-century female Dominican saints. There are only two major differences. First,

Raymond knew Catherine personally, while he only knew Agnes through testimony. Second, Catherine was a Sister of Penance—a forerunner to the contemporary Third Order active sisters—while Agnes was a contemplative nun.

In Raymond's biography of Catherine, one gets a sense of the profound personal impact that the saint had upon Raymond's spiritual life. However, the Life of St. Agnes manifests a more objective reverence. For Raymond, Catherine is a friend, but Agnes is a patron.

These two Dominican saints' diverse vocations are also on display in these biographies. While Catherine is portrayed as a bold apostolic witness and "Savior of Souls," Agnes is a radiant star of purity and holiness. Nevertheless, the contemplative core of their lives remains the same. Catherine, in fact, had a great devotion for Agnes, and the similarity in their early lives is striking: both receiving early calls through miracles, both performing ascetical works in their youth, and both facing opposition in answering their call.

#### SEE ST. AGNES BE CONFORMED TO CHRIST

When reading about the many miracles with which Agnes was blessed, one cannot help but think of the miracles of Jesus Christ. Like Christ, Agnes changes water into wine, drives out demons, gives sight to the blind, and raises the dead. Is one to conclude that God's power is limited and that he is only able to effect certain types of miracles? On the contrary, it seems better to conclude that these miracles signify the conformity of Agnes to Christ. While it is true that these charismatic gifts are not the cause of holiness, they are a fitting adornment to it. Further, Raymond always presents these miracles within the context of a life of holiness. Agnes's acts of humility, meekness and prudent direction of her monastery are as significant as her miraculous visions.

Just as Agnes's life was replete with many and diverse miracles, so too this work promises edification for a proportionate number and diversity of readers. Whether you are a Dominican fan, a lover of saints' lives, or simply someone content to be transported into the medieval world, this book is well worth adding to your collection. We owe many thanks to Sr. Mary Martin for making this delightful work available to us.

*Raymund Snyder entered the Order of Preachers in 2010. He grew up in Wichita, KS and attended the University of Notre Dame where he studied philosophy and classics. His love for St. Catherine of Siena led to an interest in her devoted biographer, Bl. Raymond of Capua.*