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Jan. 21, St. Agnes, Virgin Martyr

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Jan. 21, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Agnes, a girl of twelve or thirteen, who was martyred in Rome in the fourth century and buried beside the Via Nomentana. [1] Her cult, which began to develop almost immediately, was vigorously promoted by St. Damasus. Her name is mentioned in the first eucharistic prayer.

"Agnes is the only martyr to have been buried *in praediolo suo* (at a cemetery complex on what had been her family estate)." To understand her usefulness to Pope Damasus, whose "masculinization of Roman Christianity" "created an official Christian collective memory and self-identity that obliterated powerful women from Roman Christian imaginative horizons", search for "Agnes" in *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women, [2]* by Nicola Frances Denzey.

Every year, on this day, two lambs are taken to the Basilica of St. Agnes Outside the Walls [3] to be blessed.

Click here [4] to see pictures of the lambs used in 2006.

On Holy Thursday, they are fleeced. Their wool is used to make pallia, [5] stoles presented by popes to archbishops to symbolize that they are shepherds.

"As the church's chief pastor, Pope Benedict also wears a pallium. But while an archbishop's is made from the wool of lambs blessed by the pope on the feast of St. Agnes, the pope's is made of the wool of both lambs and sheep to reflect Jesus telling Peter 'Feed my lambs' and 'Feed my sheep.'"

Pope Benedict XVI has begun wearing a shorter pallium. [6] In addition to changing his pallium, the pope has also altered his ferula and returned to the use of the canauro. [7] "Monsignor Marini explained that the 'hermeneutics of continuity is always the exact criterion to read the path of the Church in time.'"

Click here [8] for pictures of pallia. There are bits of lead sewn into the black ends to weigh them down.

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