

The First Letter to Agnes of Prague

Translation by Frances Teresa Downing OSC

1. To the honoured and most holy virgin, the Lady Agnes, daughter of the Most Excellent and Most Illustrious King of Bohemia: 2. Clare, the unworthy family servant of Jesus Christ and the unprofitable handmaid (cf. Lk 17:10) of the enclosed ladies of the monastery of San Damiano, is everywhere subject to her, and her handmaid. She recommends herself in every way with particular respect, that she may obtain the glory of eternal happiness. (cf. Lk 17:10; Sir 50:5)

3. I greatly rejoice in the Lord and I exult on hearing most notable reports of Your holy conduct and life (cf 1 Thess 1:8; Hab 3:18) 4. for it is common knowledge, not just to me but to almost the whole world. As a result, it is not only I personally who am full of rejoicing but all those who have entered¹ and who wish to enter the service of Jesus Christ. 5. In fact, while You, more than many, could have thoroughly enjoyed the pomps and honours and the grandeur of the world and could quite legitimately and with outstanding glory, have been married to the illustrious Caesar - as would have been fitting to your and his excellence - 6. yet instead, You have rejected all that. With Your whole being and with all Your heart, You have preferred the most holy poverty and physical hardship, 7. You have taken to Yourself a Bridegroom of a far greater kind of nobility, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will keep Your virginity unmarked and unimpaired forever.

8. Loving Him, You are chaste;
touching Him, You are made more pure;
taking Him to yourself, You are a virgin. (cf Brev 21 Jan)

9. His resources are stronger, his generosity of a far higher kind,
his look more beautiful, love more tender
and every grace more attractive.

10. Now You are held close in the embrace of him
who has adorned Your breast with precious stones
and given pearls of great price for Your ears,

11. and completely surrounded You
with spring-like and shining jewels
and crowned You with a coronet of gold,
as a particular token of holiness. (Sir 45,12)

12. Therefore, my dearest sister - or I should rather say, Lady greatly respected, because You are the bride, the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ, (cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50; 2Fid 49-50) 13. You are most splendidly distinguished by the banner of inviolable virginity and most holy

¹ Literally: make and wish to make

poverty - so be strengthened in the holy service which has been begun by the burning longing of the poor Crucified One. 14. He took up the cross of his passion for all our sakes, (cf. Heb 12:2; Col 1:13; 2 Cor 5:18) snatching us from the power of the prince of darkness (cf. Col 1:13; John 12:31) in whose power we were held bound by the sin of our first parents, and reconciling us with God the Father. (cf. Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor 5:19)

15. O blessed poverty, who guarantees eternal riches to those who love and embrace her.
16. O holy poverty, to those who hold and long for her, the kingdom of heaven has been promised by God (cf. Mt 5:3) and she has surely shown forth eternal glory and blessed life.
17. O faithful poverty, because the Lord Jesus Christ, who spoke and they were made, (Ps 33:9; 148:5) who ruled heaven and earth and still does, held you worthy to be embraced before all else!
18. The foxes have holes, he said, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man, that is Christ, has nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58) but bowing his head, he gave up his Spirit. (Jo 19:30)
19. If, then, such and so great a Lord, coming to the virginal womb, wanted to be seen in the world as a despised, needy and poor man, (cf 2 Cor 8:9) 20. it was so that those who were most poor and needy, starving to death for lack of this heavenly food, it was so that, in him, such people may be enriched by possessing the kingdom of heaven. (cf. 2 Cor 8:9) 21. Rejoice all the more and be delighted, be filled with tremendous joy and spiritual happiness.(Hab 3:18) 22. For, just as You were more pleased by the world's scorn than by its honours, by poverty than by temporal riches, so You have hidden Your treasure in heaven, rather than on earth, 23. for there neither rust consumes nor moth devours nor thieves break in and steal, (Mt 6:20) and Your reward in heaven is overflowing. (Mt 5:12) 24. Also You have quite rightly merited to be named the sister, the bride and the mother (cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50) of the Son of the Most High Father and the glorious Virgin.
25. For I firmly believe You to know that the Kingdom of heaven has been promised and given by the Lord to none but the poor, (cf. Mt 5:3) for while we are giving our affections to the transient we are losing the fruit of love. 26. We cannot be devoted to God and Mammon, for either one will be loved and the other hated, or one will be served and the other despised. (cf. Mt 6:24) 27. Somebody who is clothed cannot fight somebody who is stripped, because the one who gives more purchase is the more quickly thrown to the ground. 28. Nor can we know glory in this world and also reign in it with Christ, because a camel will be able to go through the eye of a needle before

a rich man can clamber up to the Kingdom of heaven. (cf. Mt 19:24) 29. This is why You have thrown aside clothes, in other words temporal riches, so as to avoid surrendering to the one who wrestles with You, so that You can enter the heavenly Kingdom by the straight road and the narrow gate. (cf. Mt 7:13.14)

30. Indeed, what a great and praiseworthy piece of commerce it is to leave the temporal for the eternal, to be promised the heavenly in exchange for the earthly, to receive a hundred fold for one, and to possess the blessed and eternal life. (cf. Mt 19:29)
31. This is why I have drawn Your Excellency and Your Holiness by such humble prayers as I am capable of in the bowels of Christ, (cf. Phil 1:8) in order that You may be strengthened in his holy service, 32. growing from good to better, from strength to strength, (cf. Ps 84:8) so that he to whom You are devoted with all the desire of Your mind, may deign to pour out on You the reward You long for.
33. I also beg You, as much I possibly can in the Lord, that You remember in Your most holy prayers (cf. Rm 15:30) both me Your family servant although an unprofitable one (cf. Lk 17:10) - and the other sisters in the monastery with me, who are as devoted to You as I am. 34. Helped in this way, we may be able to merit the mercy of Jesus Christ so that we, together with You, may likewise merit to come to the fulfillment of the eternal vision.
35. Farewell in the Lord and pray for me. (cf 1 Thess 5:25)