

## SAINT AGNES, PATRONESS OF YOUTH

January 21, 2004

My dear young friends of the Diocese of Rockville Centre,

With great joy and happiness do I greet each and every one of you through this letter. You know how much I treasure you. When I visit you in our parishes, I am always happy to spend time with you and especially to celebrate Mass with you. Every year I visit as many of the Catholic schools as I can. Sometimes I just have the chance to have lunch and chat with you, listening to you and learning from you what you think of life, its challenges and opportunities, its times of distress and even pain. Your enthusiasm has picked me up when I have had some difficult moments. Your faith has inspired me. Your service to one another and to others beyond your schools and parishes has given me new strength to serve you and this diocese. You are my hope because you are the hope of the Church and the hope for the future.

Because I have been so deeply touched by you, I have wanted to send you a letter that you can keep and read whenever you want, a letter from my heart to yours, a letter that will reflect on some vital areas of our life that are central to your lives as they are to mine. I have chosen this Feast of Saint Agnes as the day to sign and send you this letter. Why this date? Why this young woman? Several reasons. First of all, this is the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Agnes who was put to death in Rome during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian on January 21, 304. This early roman martyr was a teenager when she was put to death for choosing her faith instead of marriage to a wealthy pagan. When Pope Pius XII created our diocese in 1957, he made the Church of Saint Agnes in Rockville Centre the cathedral church or the seat, the center, of the diocese. Thus she is twice your patroness because she is the patroness of this diocese and the protector of young people like yourselves.

I also have had for some time a personal reason to be devoted to this great saint and martyr. I was a teenager when this diocese was created in 1957, struggling to decide where to go to college and whether or not I had a vocation to be a priest. Looking back now I can see the hand of Saint Agnes helping me during the very time the Pope made

her the saint of our diocese. When I decided to try the seminary, I was sent to Rome and was ordained there. It was in the Church of Saint Agnes in the Piazza Navona, the site of her martyrdom, that I first celebrated liturgies of Holy Week after being ordained a priest. That was, in a certain sense, “my first church” and she became special to me. Now after more than three decades as a priest, another Pope, John Paul II, has sent me to be the bishop and a priest of our diocese under the protection of this same Saint Agnes. How grateful I am to God for her life and example. How thankful I am to the Holy Father that he has sent me here to be priest and bishop for you in this wonderful diocese of ours. Saint Agnes, pray for us. Saint Agnes, protect us. Saint Agnes, watch over us.

Saint Agnes was probably around twelve years old when she was put to death. Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, speaks of her being a **martyr for her faith and for the virtue of chastity**, two noble reasons for which we admire her. There is not much known about her. She is usually depicted with a lamb because the Latin word “agnus” means lamb. We do know she was a Greek Catholic living in the Greek speaking section of Rome. Thus her name could also mean “holy pure one”. Ambrose says she was put to death by the sword after she refused to give up her faith to be married to a pagan. The remains of her body are entombed in the Basilica which bears her name on the Via Nomentana, outside the old city of Rome. The strength and commitment of this young virgin martyr made such an impression on the people of Rome that, almost from the day of her burial, they began the custom of visiting her tomb on the Via Nomentana and praying for her help and protection, especially for young people. She was so admired and loved that her name was introduced into the Canon of the Roman Mass. Today she is honored in Rome and around the world wherever there are churches dedicated to her and people who have been touched and helped by her. **She is your patroness and your guide both to help you stay strong in your faith and to guide you to live a life of chastity, that Christian virtue that enables us to affirm our sexuality as God’s gift to us to be integrated into our life and to be used according to our state in life. That self-mastery means that we behave with integrity, as did Saint Agnes unwilling to use her body or have her body used for sexual pleasure as an end in itself.**

In our own diocese there are two parishes who claim her as patroness: Saint Agnes in Greenport on the North Fork and the Cathedral of Saint Agnes here in Rockville

Centre. She a patroness of all the young people of these parishes, but also in a particular way she is the patroness of all the young people of the whole diocese. Saint Agnes lived through some difficult times especially for Christians. Persecuted by the emperor, misunderstood and ridiculed by the wealthy and powerful people of Rome, she, like all the followers of Jesus, had to be ready to stand up and defend her faith knowing that she literally could be and would be put to death simply because she was a baptized member of the Church, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Hers was an era in which the society had become corrupt. Dishonesty and selfish greed were common. Truth was a victim to lies and calumny. And there was a widespread cynicism and negativism. People thought the best way to protect themselves was to be against others and the best way to get ahead was at the expense of others.

You and I have experienced much of the same in our own days here on Long Island. It can be discouraging to hear so much that is negative, to see so many people angry at one another, to have to put up with so much misunderstanding and even lies about people. It is not easy to live our faith when other people are laughing at it. It takes courage to stand apart from the crowd, to live the truth of your faith. It takes wisdom to reject the false morality, which relativizes the truth, because, “everyone else is doing” one thing or another.

Because of all that, I want to share a few thoughts with you hoping that they might touch a chord in you, that you might reflect on my observations and maybe bring some of these ideas to prayer. Above all I want to speak to you from my heart to share my thoughts with you hoping that I can be helpful to you as you grow into maturity and assuring you that I write to you as a pastor who loves you dearly.

In this letter I want to speak of three aspects of our lives in which we should be pro-active and invite you to commit yourselves. At the same time, I want to suggest that you read my simple words to you along with Saint John’s First Letter to us in which he speaks in a special way to young people like you who, he says, “are strong, because God’s word remains in you and you have mastered the evil one”. Let me organize my thoughts into three groups of two each. They are invitations to you that run opposite to what I have just described. **Instead of being “against” someone or something, you and I should be defenders and proponents of some of the greatest realities that shape our**

**lives and give us the means of building lives of truth and goodness, of happiness and joy, of beauty, justice and peace.**

Therefore I want to speak with you about being “With God and With the Church”, in order to be “Pro life and pro family”, for the Good of the World and Especially the Poor.

**I. First of all I ask you to be WITH GOD AND WITH THE CHURCH.**

“Beloved we love God because he loved us first”. God’s love is eternal and he has known and loved us eternally. He is the one who created the world and every one of us. He is the one who watches us and protects us. Yet the fact is that so many around us think God is irrelevant or unnecessary or a hindrance to their own freedom to do what they want. You and I know that at times God can seem to be distant. We can wonder if he really cares about us when we have to face difficulties or deal with a tragedy in our own lives. Since coming here I have had to attend funerals of people your age. I have shared with you the grief and the pain. As your bishop I have prayed for you and with you. I’ve had the opportunity to visit with some of you when you were sick and you have opened your hearts about your recovery. You share your burdens, worries and anxieties. All these can seem to put God up for grabs. But the truth is what John tells us: **God always loves us. He never abandons us.** The only healthy and real way to live our lives is by living it with the one who gave it: God. We owe him our worship of gratitude and thanksgiving.

God became visible at a certain moment in time with the birth of Jesus. He who is the eternal Son of God dwells with God “in unapproachable light”. Yet God wanted us to be saved by one like us. So Jesus became man, took on flesh and blood just like us and lived and died here on earth for us. As he was raised up on the cross, blood and water flowed from his side and from that cross Jesus gave birth to the Church.

We are all weak. We struggle and fail ourselves and we witness the struggles and failures of others around us. But as the Pope told us in Toronto at World Youth Day “we are not the sum of our failings. We are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to be images of Jesus Christ to the world”. Because we find Jesus in the Church

and because he gives us his life through the Church, you and I should see ourselves blessed to be members of the Church. We should be proud to call ourselves Catholic because it means that we share the Eucharist and we are strengthened and protected by the sacraments. Once baptized we belong to Christ and he belongs to us. He is our savior and becomes our friend. He accompanies us along the journey of life and is always available to us through his body, the Church. If we sin, he is the one who takes away our sins through the sacrament of penance. When you are ready to get married, he is the one whom you will encounter in the sacrament of marriage in the Church. When you are sick, he will be there to help you and heal you. If he calls you to be a priest or to live as a consecrated Sister or Brother, he will be the object of your heart's love. And because he is in the Church as the Church's head and heart, he brings us into a shared life with him and with one another. **We belong to one another because we belong to him.** The more we share him with one another, the more we will experience his love and the more the Church will reflect the life and love of her founder, her head and her friend, Jesus.

The Church is a mystery where we find Christ and salvation. As His Body, we are his Church. As his holy People we make up the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church which is guided by the Spirit and witnesses in this world to God's ever present love for everyone. We know that the Church cannot be reduced to an institution like any other. It is founded by Christ and held together by bonds that are both visible and invisible. You and I should seek strength from every member of the Church: from Mary to whom we pray especially the rosary, from the saints like Saint Agnes and from one another. In this way, as that Church we become the powerful witness of Christ to the world, receiving our strength from the sacraments but especially from the Eucharist that is the source and summit of our life together. Thus that worship we owe God because we are Pro-God is best offered by offering the Eucharist for then we are united with Christ, our head, offering Christ to the Father as His Body on earth, animated by his Holy Spirit giving witness to His love till the end of time.

## **II. Together then we are called to be Pro-LIFE and Pro-FAMILY**

“We are God’s family...we live in him and he lives in us”.

How often do we see and hear of situations in which human life is made fun of. How often does our society regard human life as a commodity to be discarded if it becomes inconvenient or interferes with something else a person wants at the moment? You have told me of your love for your grandparents. I have seen you rally around a friend who is sick. I have noticed the way you act when little children are around. And you make me so proud! You know that human life is precious, every human life. You know that life, like love, has to be protected and nurtured and cared for because it can be so easily harmed, so easily injured, so easily lost.

To be pro-life is to commit ourselves to protecting and defending human life all the time in every circumstance. It begins with the first moment of conception. Unlike animals we do not simply conceive, we pro-create. A human child is a product of free human beings who give themselves to each other in love. That child does not become human over time. That child is human from the first moment of life in its mother’s womb and remains human until the last breath of life on earth prior to returning to God who is the true creator of each and every one of us.

Whether we are young or old, rich or poor, with lots of friends or seemingly alone in the world, sick or healthy, our life is precious. When the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Cooke, was dying of a terrible cancer, I wrote to him as one friend to another. He wrote back and said to me “even in the midst of my suffering, I know that life is valuable and precious and always to be revered”. His secretary wrote at the bottom of that last letter I received from the Cardinal, “Bill, the Cardinal cannot dictate anymore because he is in such pain but he told me to tell you that he loves you”. We can show that we love God by the way we show our love to one another.

And that means being always pro-family. I know that isn’t always easy. I have five siblings and each one at times has been a pain. They can each say the same thing about me. One of my brothers died eight years ago. He wasn’t always the easiest one to get along with but every day I miss him just as I do my mother and father. Who else is always there? Who else knows us and understand us? Who else gives us the possibility to test our own abilities and be tested by them in turn? When I was a chaplain at the Marymount School in Rome I used to spend Tuesday evenings just hanging out and

talking with the kids in the dorm. Students living away from home talk a lot about family, good, bad, funny, not so funny. But what I always ended up pointing out in our conversations is a real truth: part of our growing up is discovering that our parents are always our parents but they are also our friends, really our friends. **For family is the best place to discover friendship and to learn how to be a friend to each other.** The more we share with each other in family, the better we understand the true bonds of human living and human flourishing, the more we will find friends and be friends to others. Saint Agnes came from a loving family. It was in that family she discovered what really mattered was faith, family and friends. Because of the love they had for one another, she had the courage to respond to God's call and offer her life as an inspiration and guide for us in our faith, in our love, in our lives.

### **III. We are called to commit ourselves for the GOOD OF THE WORLD AND ESPECIALLY THE POOR.**

In the gospels, Jesus often speaks of the "world" meaning all those forces that are against God and His message of salvation. Such forces dwell in darkness and the world that is caught up in darkness is a world that cannot recognize Jesus as the Son of God made man to redeem us. But the world as created by God is good. Because he made it and it exists according to his plan, we can embrace all that is good in the world so long as we see it as God's creation and not as something that we own or that we can exploit for our own selfish interests.

You and I know that selfish interests are all around us. There are those who misuse the goods of this world or who exploit the riches of the earth with no thought of others now or in the future. There are those who want to dominate the world's goods for their own ends or even deprive others of their rightful share in the world's many gifts and treasures. To them and to us, God gives the same message, we are stewards of this world. We have every right to use the goods that God has given us because we are the apex of his creative love. Yet that does not give us the right to misuse or exploit or destroy the world's many and wondrous gifts putting the future at risk for our own immediate pleasure.

Pope John Paul II has told us there are two kinds of ecology: natural ecology which is our concern to use the world's goods wisely and with a sense of social justice for our own and future generations. There is also human ecology which brings the same care and reverence to human beings, especially the most vulnerable, the unborn, the elderly, the handicapped, who might also be exploited or cast aside by the more powerful. It would be a sad thing if we took our responsibilities for the earth seriously but ignored our responsibilities for one another, especially the most vulnerable.

That is why I do not hesitate to commend you to have a special concern for the poor. Jesus loved the poor. He saw those who did not have much of this world's goods as particular reflections of God's creative love. There are many forms of poverty, material, social, spiritual. Yet in all of them the key is that the poor are vulnerable because they do not have the means to resist exploitation or rejection by the powerful, the wealthy or those who wish to use them with no reference to their own human dignity. There is no such reality as a human being without dignity. **We can never look on anyone as intrinsically inferior to us or as unworthy of being treated with the respect and care that reflect the love and protection God offers to us all.**

At certain times in our history, whole groups of people have been treated as unworthy of respect, Blacks, Jews, Catholic immigrants. At other times we have the example of nations left behind because of economic exploitation by people within and without their countries: Haiti and so many countries in Africa. It is not just material poverty that is at issue. Many embrace material poverty in order to be free of this world's goods and live free of the things that distract us from more important truths like God and serving one another. Think of religious women and men. Think of the men and women from Long Island who have gone off to be missionaries. Material poverty, voluntarily embraced, can give us new freedom to live better and more dignified lives.

The poor, however, who cry out to heaven for justice, are those who are unjustly deprived of a rightful share in the goods of this world in order to live. They are those who are never given a chance to use their God-given talents for their own and their loved ones' future. They are those who have had their basic freedom denied and their human dignity crushed. **You and I are called by God to build up this world both by using the world's goods wisely and by seeing to it that everyone, especially the poor, are**

**not deprived of what they need and are given the opportunity to achieve what their talents allow and their human dignity demands.**

Let me close where I began: assuring you of my affection for each and every one of you. Because we are baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ, we share his life. We belong to him and we belong to one another. That spiritual bond is the strongest union we can ever have. Cherish and protect it all the days of your life. Be proud to be a member of the Church and live the Church's sacramental life, especially the Eucharist as the best way to keep in your hearts and lives God's own love dwelling within you. Be quick to defend and protect human life and to build up the bonds of family as the best foundation for your own lives and for our world today. And see to it that you align yourself with God, the creator of this world, by being good stewards of the world's goods eager to reach out to the poor and the vulnerable as your brothers and sisters in a spirit of solidarity.

In his homily at the closing Mass of World Youth Day in Toronto, the Holy Father said to you: **“The world you are inheriting is a world that desperately needs a new sense of brotherhood and human solidarity. It is a world that needs to be touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God's love. It needs witnesses to that love. The world needs salt. It needs you – to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world”**

Because the world needs you and you need to be strengthened to be the salt of the earth and light to the world, I want in this letter to make a special invitation to as many of you as can to join me in traveling to Cologne, Germany in August 2005 for the next World Youth Day with the Holy Father. This year on August 21, the Diocese is organizing a diocesan Youth Day at the Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington. We will have a great day together that will culminate with Mass one year to the day before we celebrate Mass with the Pope in Cologne. I look forward to being with all you young people this coming August 21 and I reassure you of the solidarity you and I share as we prepare for that day.

Seventeen hundred years ago, Saint Agnes was that young woman who showed by her life and her death that solidarity of human love transformed by God's own love. She was the witness who changed the hearts of so many in her own time and throughout

the seventeen hundred years since her martyrdom. She is your patroness and your protectress. Look to her. Be inspired by her. Seek her help and she will be there to strengthen your commitment to being witnesses today of God's love as salt of the earth and light of the world.

A martyr of the twentieth century, Blessed Poveda in Spain, used to pray to Saint Agnes. I give you that prayer as I commend you to the protective love of Saint Agnes,

You, Agnes, followed Christ, even unto death,

Teach us to love him as you loved him;

To witness to him as you did with courage;

To put love for him before our own lives;

To renounce the idols presented to us by society;

To risk everything in response to his fidelity Amen.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "William Murphy", followed by a vertical red line.

Bishop of Rockville Centre

This 21<sup>st</sup> Day of January, 2004

The Feast of Saint Agnes