

# Life History



Maria Agnesi was an important figure in the eighteenth-century in Italy. During this time in Italy it was not unusual for a woman to be educated and in the academic world. In fact, women were admired for their intellect and this allowed woman of the time to do things and go further than other women during this time were not able to do. Agnesi was born on May 16, 1718 in Milan, Italy and was the eldest of 21 children. Her father was Pietro Agnesi, the son of a wealthy silk merchant. Pietro was a professor of mathematics at the University of Bologna; this enabled him to give Maria an excellent education. At the age of nine, Agnesi was called the “Oracle of Seven Languages,” because she could speak Latin, Greek, French, Hebrew, and several other modern languages fluently.

At the age of twenty Agnesi wrote *Proposition Philosophicae*, a collection of essays on philosophy and natural science that was based on the discussions of the intellectuals who gathered at her father’s home and the inspiration of Isaac Newton. In this publication, Agnesi spoke freely on how she believed that women should be

educated. Agnesi then began work on her second and last publication, *Analytical Institutions*. This book was actually not intended for a publication, but rather a textbook for her brothers. The academic world was very enthusiastic when the book was completed because it was the most complete works on finite and infinitesimal analysis. There are three sections to this book. The first section deals with the analysis of finite quantities, the elementary problems of maxima, minima, tangents, and inflection points. The second section is dedicated to analysis of infinitely small quantities and integral calculus. Finally the third section deals with the inverse method of tangents and differential equations.

Agnesi was elected to the Bologna Academy of Science by the nomination of Pope Benedict XIV after the success of her book. Her name was added to the faculty roll and the university sent her a diploma dated October 5, 1750. There has been a debate by historians on whether or not she accepted the position. On a reliable, first account reference; Agnesi did not accept the position to teach at the University of Bologna. However, it is known that her father did become ill in 1748 and she did lecture in his place. Agnesi did ask her father if she could become a nun, but her father refused saying that it was not something that a wealthy young girl should do. The latter half of Agnesi's life was dedicated to her religious studies and charitable work. It is stated that Agnesi lives in a home with poor people until her death. She has said to have died without any money to her name because she gave it all away to benefit the poor. Agnesi passed away in May 1799, just before her 81<sup>st</sup> birthday, probably because hydrothorax. She was later buried in a common grave for poor people.

Agnesi did not continue to teach or study mathematics after her father's death. Why? We will never know, but it may imply that she only pursued mathematics to make her father proud because her father was an inspiration to her. However, we must also take under consideration that she was basically forced to take care of her brothers and sisters. The latter part of her life was also dedicated to helping others less fortunate than her.