

The Life of Sr. Mary Wilhelmina

THE LIFE OF
SR. MARY
WILHELMINA

The Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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Mary, Queen of Apostles

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“Every man’s life is acted out between two great events: his birth and his death. Man has two outlooks: an outlook toward life, and an outlook toward death. The pagan world was, for the most part, oppressed with the outlook toward death. . . .

After centuries of gloom, Christ was born in a poor stable in Bethlehem. This was a birth, which led to a death, which death was to remove the sting and gloom of death forever after from the lives of men. This was the good news, from which the practice of Christianity, a seeming paradox of joy and self-denial, sprang.”

—Sister Wilhelmina

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Introduction

“God’s will, God’s will,
God’s will be done!
Praised be the Father,
Praised be the Son!
Praised be Divine Love, Lord Holy Ghost!
Praised be in union with the heavenly host!”

One year after the death of our beloved foundress, the above poem still rings in our ears as though our beloved Sister Wilhelmina were still thumping her cane in time to the unforgettable rhythm of her own creation. This little poem encapsulates her name, her life, her purpose: to show that there is another reality, no less real than what can be perceived around us, that there is indeed a loving God Who seeks only our good, our ultimate happiness, for all eternity.

Sister Wilhelmina understood that true holiness consists not in niceness or pleasant feelings but in a battle of wills; she was determined, at all costs, to surrender her strong will to an even stronger one: the will of God.

It was in the same spirit of the secondary love of her life, the love of her mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she constantly gave her will over to God. In the Blessed Mother, the Word—Our Lord Jesus Christ—became flesh and dwelt among us. In the life of Sister Wilhelmina, a new community took flesh for the succor of a suffering Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, in prayerful support of her priests.

We firmly believe that Sister Wilhelmina is the most timely and timeless witness to an increasingly self-centered and narrow-minded world. Her beautiful life led to a beautiful death after ninety-five years, seventy-five of which were vowed to God's service and glory. The staggering length of time was a simple composition of daily embraces of God's will at each moment, in a deep spirit of faith and loving perseverance.

Reams have been written in the last half century on the liturgical changes and fallout of the Second Vatican Council, on civil rights, and on the rise in concern for social justice, but few have had the all-encompassing lived experience of our dear Sister Wilhelmina. Her insuperable hope for humanity rested not on her laurels of service, nor in her political views, but in a vision that has been all but forgotten: that her Beloved Spouse, Our Lord Jesus Christ, came not as a secular leader but as a Suffering Servant. His death and resurrection were meant to change our hearts, not our living circumstances. With her unshakeable faith, she never lost sight of the divine mission of her Spouse and of the Church: not to save bodies but to save immortal souls. She understood that suffering, especially in union with Our Lord, was the most effective means to this end. She spoke when

necessary, but preached the Gospel far more eloquently in her peaceful and joyful life as a spouse of the Crucified.

We believe she will be reckoned with the great traditional witnesses of the last century, remembered not so much for her persuasive writings, nor her genius, but rather for her very experience as a religious, holding on to the Faith amidst the terrible trials to which the Church has been subject, in resemblance to Christ crucified. From the very trenches, the very heart of the conflict, Sister endured all in union with her Divine Master. Hers was one of the few voices that was willing to point out the mistakes made, allowing water to seep into the bark of Peter. Hers was the fortitude that emerged from the trenches of silence and suffering, and at nearly seventy-five years of age, she reclaimed the Faith lost by almost all around her. She shared the story of a generation of “martyrs” whose suffering is known only to God. She was a true witness to hope in the authentic renewal of religious life for the future, with a clear vision of the Church’s supernatural mission, and the self-understanding of nuns as brides of Christ.

Sister Wilhelmina offered her life for the sacred priesthood, which was sadly disfigured in her time, by going back to the very Sacrifice to which it had laid claim for centuries. In the ancient liturgy, she found true union with God that surpassed all human efforts. She truly became one of God’s cherished and devoted friends in her love for the unadulterated deposit of faith.

Now on the other side of the veil, Sister Wilhelmina dwells in the very reality to which her life continually pointed, that of the spiritual world. She belongs to the host

of witnesses who, like the Divine Bridegroom, are so close to us and always ready to assist us in our own battles. She shows that holiness is possible even in this life, that saints are real, and that miracles do happen. And in her constant battle cry of "God's will!" she attests to the infinite value of each passing moment for storing up treasures in heaven. We were privileged to know her, to dwell with her, and to be called her sisters and intimate friends. We continue to strive to follow her Christlike example, and we earnestly hope that you will come to love her too, and be aided by her powerful assistance from heaven. In the short time that we have been given on this earth, may we all endeavor to imitate Sister Wilhelmina and seek, above all else, "God's will!"

Journeys of Faith and Freedom

“Although my family was materially poor and I had grown up in a segregated world, I did not feel myself to be disadvantaged in the least. Our wealth was our Roman Catholic faith.”

—Sister Wilhelmina

When asked to recount her vocation story, Sister Wilhelmina, with her customary love of history, would begin with the seeds of the Catholic Faith that were sewn in her family three generations before her birth: “The Faith had come down to me from my mother’s side of the family. One of my maternal great-grandmothers, Mary Madden, had been the slave of a French property-holder in St. Genevieve, Missouri. When Mary became Catholic, her owner freed her and her young son. ‘I cannot keep you in slavery any longer,’ he told her. ‘Since you are now baptized, that would be like keeping Christ in slavery.’”

Mary and her husband, James Alexander Madden, raised

their son, Charles Joseph, in St. Louis, where Mary worked as a cook for a prominent French family named Lucas. Sister Wilhelmina's future grandfather was baptized at the church of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the Jesuit parish dedicated May 18, 1873, which served the Black Catholics of St. Louis. Charles attended the parish school and served Mass there, at the same church where his granddaughter would also be baptized and attend Mass as a child. His parents, James and Mary, were faithful parishioners of St. Elizabeth's, and they were very close to the parish priest, Fr. Ignatius Panken, SJ. After their deaths in 1883 and 1886, respectively, he not only offered their Requiem Masses, but also buried them in his lot in Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis.

Some years before Charles's birth in 1866, Theodore Grammot LaRose, a free man of African descent who worked as a ship's carpenter, had come from his native island of Santo Domingo to the port of Savannah, Georgia. He decided to settle there, bought some land, and then, as Sister Wilhelmina put it, "set about looking for a bride." He bought a slave woman, Mary Elizabeth, the daughter of an African slave mother and a Cree Indian father; he introduced her to the Catholic Faith and made sure that she was baptized before he married her. It is not certain whether Mary Elizabeth was given this name at her birth or at her baptism, but Sister Wilhelmina was her namesake, for Sister Wilhelmina's mother, Ella Theresa, remembered her half-Indian grandmother fondly: "I knew her well and loved her, the only grandparent that I knew." Theodore LaRose and his wife, Mary Elizabeth, had two children, one of whom was named Mary Louise.

How Mary Louise LaRose of Savannah met and married Charles Joseph Madden of St. Louis is a testimony to Divine Providence; their eldest daughter, Ella Theresa, told the story in a letter written for her grandchildren in the late 1960s. These future grandparents of Sister Wilhelmina both had their own aspirations to dedicate themselves to God's service: Mary Louise had seriously considered becoming an Oblate Sister of Providence, as her granddaughter did in fact become, and Charles pursued a Benedictine vocation, as also his granddaughter would. Ella recounted her father's story:

When Charles was seventeen years old, his mother died and he began to work at the church [of St. Elizabeth, St. Louis] assisting the sexton and spent most of his time with him in the church basement after work, reading books loaned to him by Father Panken—most of them lives of the saints. He wanted to study for the priesthood and applied to the Benedictine Order. He was refused admission to the monastery but was advised to go to a monastery on an island off the coast of Georgia. This was not a true monastery but a school for Negro boys. He spent two years there as a layman, teaching the youngest boys. Becoming dissatisfied with the conditions at the school, and told that he would not be sent to the regular novitiate house, because he stuttered, he left the island and went to Savannah, Georgia, the nearest city. He was now twenty-one years old. He had five dollars, and a recommendation for work.

He obtained work as an orderly in St. Joseph Catholic Hospital. His intention was to save enough money to return to St. Louis and his family and friends. During this time he met and fell in love with my mother, Mary Louise LaRose, and stayed in Georgia.

Although Charles's original dream of becoming a religious and a priest was not fulfilled, he did become a member of the Third Order of St. Francis and so participated in the religious life as much as he could as a layman. When he passed away in 1936 in St. Louis, he was buried in the brown Franciscan habit, and Franciscan brothers from St. Anthony Church attended his wake and recited the prayers for the dead.

Mary Louise's initial vocational discernment may have been sparked by Mother Mathilda Beasley, Georgia's first Black nun. Mary Louise learned to read and write at a time when educating Black children was illegal in Georgia. Mathilda was most likely Mary Louise's teacher at the secret school she began at their parish. Mathilda later entered the Franciscan Order at York, England, and returned to Savannah two years later to open an orphanage. She settled alongside St. Benedict the Moor parish, founded by Charles's sole remaining former confrere, Father Melchior. Mother Mathilda openly resumed teaching, and supported her own charitable works by sewing.

Perhaps initiated into sewing by Mother Mathilda, Mary Louise pursued this livelihood. As Charles boarded with Mary Louise's sewing instructor, the work occasioned their meeting. Ella related: "My mother, a-seventeen-year-old, was an apprentice seamstress. On a particular night, the dressmaker

had a lot of work that had to be gotten [done]. She kept my mother overtime. My father came home while Miss La Rose was still there at the dressmaker's shop. When my mother finished her work, the dressmaker asked Mr. Madden to take her home, and that budded into marriage."

After their marriage, Charles and Mary Louise Madden settled in Tennille, Georgia, where Charles bought land and built a frame-house, which the citizens called "the prettiest house in town." His daughter Ella recorded, "My father disliked being in debt. When the house was finished and he was given the keys, he paid the full cost in cash, \$1000."

The Maddens were the only Catholic family in Tennille, so the town had no Catholic church. Ella remembered, "Once a month a priest visited another town, Sandersville, Georgia, three hours away by train, to celebrate Mass and hear confession. My parents made the trip each month to go to confession, hear Mass and receive Communion. . . . Every other summer my mother took us to visit our grandmother [Mary Elizabeth] in Savannah for two weeks. We went to Mass at St. Benedict Catholic Church and the new baby was baptized."

Being the only Catholics in town led to interesting exchanges at Ella's one-room schoolhouse. During recess, the children would chant back and forth on the playground, "Baptist, Baptist is my name, I'm Baptist till I die! I've been baptized in the Baptist church, I'll stay on the Baptist side." "Methodist, Methodist is my name," the other children would chant back in the same fashion. "Mama, are we Baptists or Methodists?" little Ella asked when she got home from school. "You're neither one. You're Catholic." Ella

thoughtfully started washing the dishes. Then she remarked, "I know what I'll chant when I get to school: Catholic, Catholic is my name . . ." "Now, don't you go singin' that!" her mother hastily checked her, fearing the backlash from anti-Catholic sentiment.

Charles and Mary Louise supplemented the secular education that their children received, instilling in them a deep love of their Catholic Faith and also a zeal for learning. As Ella recalled, "My father taught me my catechism. My mother taught me my prayers. My father was a student all his life and constantly added books to our home library. He read children's books to me long before I was old enough to attend school. These were happy Sunday afternoons."

When Ella was only ten years old, she lost her beloved grandmother, mother, and baby sister in a single year: Mary Elizabeth died of a stroke, Mary Louise in childbirth, and the baby sister of pneumonia. After a few years, Charles entered a second marriage with Mary Josephine Doley; like Charles and his late wife, Mary Josephine also was a devout Catholic who had pursued a religious vocation. Orphaned at the age of ten, she had been entrusted to St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament at their convent in Cornwells, Pennsylvania. She actually entered the community as a sister but left at the age of twenty; she met and married Charles Madden a few years later in 1905. Mary Josephine's formation under the hand of Mother Drexel and her experience of religious life doubtless contributed to the strong Catholic formation of Sister Wilhelmina's mother.

This second marriage of Charles Madden also makes another connection between Sister Wilhelmina's family

history and her life as a religious, both as an Oblate Sister of Providence and as a Benedictine. St. Katharine Drexel had begun her new order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, at her blood sister's home in Torresdale, Pennsylvania. She called the temporary convent St. Michel. In the meantime, a new convent, St. Elizabeth's, was built two miles down the road from St. Michel, where Mother Drexel received Sister Wilhelmina's step-grandmother. Bishop Ryan of Philadelphia gave Mother Drexel a precious relic of the True Cross that had belonged to St. John Neumann, a friend and part-time chaplain of the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Mother Drexel then encouraged her sister to convert the old convent at St. Michel into a shrine for the relic of the True Cross, which she did. Many years later, the shrine closed, and the pews were sent to the newly founded community of the Benedictines of Mary in 2002. The next year, by God's providence, Sister Wilhelmina happened upon the grounds of St. Michel, so close to the place where her step-grandmother was raised. Without knowing where she was, Sister Wilhelmina found the grave of a priest who would have known Mother Drexel and perhaps also her young charges. Sister was mysteriously moved to recite Psalm 129, "Out of the Depths," the traditional prayer for the dead, with great devotion.

Charles Madden's work transferred him back to St. Louis in 1912, where Ella attended Sumner High School, the oldest and most renowned high school for Black students, with many notable alumni in the fields of music, sports, and education. There, Ella first met her future husband, Oscar Lee Lancaster.

Oscar came from a very different family background. His grandfather, William Lancaster, was an English overseer who had eloped with a slave; their only son, William Jr., strongly resembled his White father and consequently did not suffer any discrimination from the local White society in Tifton, Georgia. As Sister Wilhelmina told the story, however, "William Jr. disappointed his White neighbors when he followed his father's example by marrying black-as-coal Henrietta Green," the daughter of a Baptist minister. They had two sons, the eldest being Oscar Lee Lancaster.

By the age of six, Oscar had lost both his mother and little brother; at the age of twelve, he ran into trouble with his father, the details of which remain unknown. At this point, Oscar had also gotten as far in his education as the little country school for Negroes could take him. Consequently, at the young age of twelve, he ran away from home.