

SAINT PHILOMENA
THE
WONDER-WORKER



Saint Philomena, pray for us!

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THE
WONDER-WORKER

by

Father Paul O'Sullivan, O.P.
(E. D. M.)

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and the torment of death shall not touch them . . . And though in the sight of men they suffered torments, their hope is full of immortality. Afflicted in few things, in many they shall be well rewarded: because God hath tried them, and found them worthy of himself.”

—Wisdom 3:1, 4–5

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*Come, spouse of Christ,
receive the crown which the Lord
hath prepared for thee for ever:
for the love of Whom thou didst shed thy blood.
Thou hast loved justice and hated iniquity:
therefore God, thy God,
hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness
above thy fellows. With thy comeliness
and thy beauty, set out, proceed prosperously,
and reign.”*

— Tract from the Feast of a Virgin Martyr,
The Roman Missal

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Sometimes a question arises about devotion to St. Philomena being no longer acceptable in the Church. This question comes up because on February 14, 1961, just prior to Vatican Council II, the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Rome issued an instruction that St. Philomena's feast day, August 11, was to be removed from all liturgical calendars (which would include the liturgical calendar of the universal Church as well as calendars of particular dioceses or congregations which might include special feast days). A number of other feast days were likewise dropped at that time.

This instruction was a liturgical directive. It was *not* a declaration that St. Philomena was not a saint, nor a prohibition of private devotion to St. Philomena.

Actually, at least in the United States, the instruction had little or no effect as far as the liturgy goes, for the Feast of St. Philomena had not been listed in the Missal for some years even prior to the instruction.

In any case, private devotion to St. Philomena is still very praiseworthy. It is our hope that a renewal of devotion to St. Philomena will lead to a great shower of graces and favors from Heaven—to lead, in turn, to the restoration of the Feast of St. Philomena throughout the universal Church.

—TAN Books
October 26, 1993

LETTERS OF CARDINALS AND BISHOPS

Pacõ Patriarcal, Goa

My dear Reverend Father,

It was with most lively satisfaction that I read the beautiful life of St. Philomena published by you. I am one of the least but most sincere clients of this great Saint, having received through her powerful intercession most special favours, among them £8,000 for the Missionary Colleges.

I dedicated to her honour *our principal chapel*. I have also placed under her protection and that of St. Francis Xavier the pious Association of the Missions which I have established.

Aware of how potent is the intercession of St. Philomena with the Almighty, and also moved by sentiments of gratitude towards her, I heartily congratulate you on the publication of the life of the dear little Saint, venerated by the Roman Pontiffs themselves and so tenderly loved by that great Saint, the Curé of Ars.

I fervently hope that this book may have the widest possible circulation.

I remain, my dear Father,

Yours devotedly in Jesus Christ,
✠ *Theotónio*, Archbishop of Goa
and Patriarch of the Indies

Archbishop's House
 Port-of-Spain, Trinidad
 May 15th, 1926

My dear Father O'Sullivan,

I thank you very sincerely for the copy you sent me of *St. Philomena The Wonder-Worker*, which I read and admired very much. It is very attractive, well printed, the style is simple and the reading matter informative and deliciously compelling.

No one can read the book without becoming a client of the Saint. I lent it to a person who had a friend seriously ill with rheumatic fever, and thanks to the intercession of St. Philomena and Our Lady of Lourdes, the sick person was marvelously cured. I shall always recommend the book to our people here.

I remain, dear Father O'Sullivan,

Yours devotedly in Our Divine Lord,
 † *John Pius*, Archbishop of Port-of-Spain

June 2nd, 1926
 Archbishop's House

My dear Father Paul,

Thanks very much for the copy of *St. Philomena The Wonder-Worker* you so kindly sent me. I read it with keen interest. It is simply fascinating, well written and beautifully brought out. Anyone reading it is sure to develop a strong devotion to the Saint who has such a powerful influence with our Divine Lord.

I hope to spread the devotion to St. Philomena in

this Archdiocese. She has a large number of clients here already.

Wishing your Apostolate of the Press every blessing, I am, believe me, dear Father Paul,

Very sincerely yours,
✠ *Robert W. Spence*,
Archbishop of Adelaide

Archbishop's House
Westminster, London SW. 1
30th June, 1926

Dear Father O'Sullivan,

Thanks very much for the book on St. Philomena, which I trust will lead to an increase of devotion to the little Saint so closely associated with the Cure of Ars. Once more I beg God to bless the work of Catholic propaganda in which you are engaged. May God give complete success to all your efforts.

Your devoted servant in Christ,
✠ *Francis Cardinal Bourne*
Archbishop of Westminster

Patriarchal Palace
Lisbon, 18th of August, 1927

To the Rev. Father P. O'Sullivan.

Very Reverend and Dear Father:

We heartily approve and recommend the beautiful little book recently published by you entitled *St.*

Philomena The Wonder-Worker.

The book is full of interesting information, its teaching eminently practical, and its arguments carry with them conviction—based, as they are, not only on the authority of distinguished writers and scientists, but still more on the clear, categorical and repeated decisions of the Roman Congregations and the Declarations of the Sovereign Pontiffs themselves.

We, therefore, desire that the book have a wide circulation for the greater glory of God and for the honour of His servant Philomena. We grant 100 days indulgence to the faithful of this Patriarchate who read the book for at least a quarter of an hour each day.

I remain, my dear Father,

Yours devotedly in Jesus Christ,
✠ *António*, Cardinal Patriarch

Bishop's House
Middlesborough
18 January, 1929

My dear Father O'Sullivan,

Let me thank you very warmly for your goodness in sending me a copy of your excellent booklet entitled *St. Philomena The Wonder-Worker.*

Let me say at once that I am very pleased with your book, which is so calculated to spread devotion to the Dear Little Saint. There is a devotion to her in this diocese which I should like very much to increase. I should be so glad if you would order for me 100 copies of your book. We have a statue of the Saint in the Cathedral

here. At St. Patrick's Church, Middlesborough, the Saint has her chapel, with a nice altar and statue, where she has worked many wonders. I feel sure your book will do much good in spreading the devotion to the Saint.

Yours sincerely in Jesus Christ,
✠ *Richard*, Bishop of Middlesborough

Foreword

A PRIEST AND A SOLDIER

The writer of the following short sketch [that is, this book] was himself at one time very little in sympathy with the “dear Little Saint,” as the holy Curé of Ars loved to style St. Philomena. In fact, he strenuously opposed the erection of her statue in the church then under his direction. Happily, however, the Saint, in her own inimitable way, overcame with a sweet violence this unworthy opposition and transformed her would-be antagonist into one of her most grateful clients. This fact will go far to show how impartial is the testimony he bears to her.

The erection of her statue in his church was the signal for a shower of graces bestowed not only on him, but on the members of his flock, who speedily became convinced by personal experience that St. Philomena was, in truth, a most amazing wonder-worker and a most generous protector of all who have recourse to her.

Favors were multiplied, blessings followed in quick succession, graces of all kinds were granted in such abundance that verily the floodgates of Heaven seemed open. Frequently as many as fifteen lamps were seen burning before her statue, whereas the custom of the church had, up to then, allowed of but one lamp for each altar. When the same church was threatened with

seemingly inevitable ruin, the Saint intervened and saved it from certain destruction in a truly wonderful way.

If the writer of the sketch is a priest, the kind friend who has undertaken to defray the cost of the publication is a soldier, who, no less than the priest, has reason to be grateful to the Little Thaumaturga.¹ Many and great are the favors he owes her—not the least of which: man’s great ambition, “a happy marriage and a charming home.” Very striking was the favor bestowed on him during the Great War. Though exempted for many reasons from going to the front, he nevertheless placed himself under the protection of the Saint, abandoned a flourishing business and joined the army as a simple soldier. Throwing himself into the work of the war with the strenuousness of an ardent patriot, he covered himself with glory and rapidly rose to the rank of Staff Major. In this capacity he enjoyed the highest esteem of his general and won the warm affection of his fellow officers. As a member of the artillery corps, he braved the greatest dangers. Yet amidst the most imminent perils he escaped unscathed, literally without a scratch. Finally, on leaving the army, instead of finding himself destitute, as was the fate of many thousands of his fellow officers, he speedily obtained a lucrative position very much superior to that which he had so generously abandoned. This new blessing he attributes to the never-failing kindness of his saintly Protectress.

In gratitude and love the priest and the soldier offer

1 Thaumaturge—miracle-worker. (“Thaumaturga” is a feminine form of the word.)—*Editor*, 1993.

to the public this little tribute of their devotion and affection.

—S.S.

OUR SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In compiling these short and unpretentious pages not a few works have been consulted, such as *Roma Sotterranea* by de Rossi, which we consulted with reference to the Catacombs. The life of Pauline Marie Jaricot, whose marvelous cure at the Shrine of St. Philomena was one of the main reasons why the Saint's Office was granted to the Church, furnished us with the circumstances bearing on that subject. We perused with care the life of the Curé d'Ars because of his well-known devotion to the Saint and his wonderful recovery through her intercession. Finally, various works and pamphlets which bore directly on the Sanctuary or miracles of the Saint were put under contribution.

Personal experiences have been added, and facts gleaned during a prolonged visit to the Saint's Sanctuary at Mugnano are likewise embodied here.

Chapter 1

THE CATACOMBS

Who has not heard of the Catacombs of Rome—those wonderful, hidden passages and corridors, those subterranean chambers dug out in the bowels of the earth and forming, as it were, a belt of underground fortresses around and in the close vicinity of the Eternal City. After St. Peter's and a visit to the Holy Father, the Catacombs, with their hallowed memories, are the great sight of Rome. Here venerable Pontiffs, saintly Bishops, spotless Virgins, fearless Martyrs, gathered together in secret to celebrate the Divine Mysteries. Here too, tender youths and venerable old men, proud patricians and humble plebeians, nay princes even and slaves, knelt at the same altar, adored the same God, and participated in the same Divine Food.

Here they met in the evening at the feet of the venerable Pontiff; a few short hours after, they were fighting with lions in the arena, and when the darkness of the night again overshadowed the earth, their mangled remains were borne back for the last benediction to the feet of Christ's Vicar on earth. Then they were reverently enclosed in crypts hollowed out in the tufa granolare or soft stone, where, side by side, the living dwelt with the dead—these resting after

their labors, those awaiting their summons to the battlefield.

The meaning of the word "Catacomb" is not evident at first sight. It would seem to mean a depression or hollow in the ground, and we find it applied for the first time to a neighborhood in the Appian Way, close by the tomb of Cecilia Metellus, under which lay the cemetery of St. Sebastian. The name Catacomb, given to this cemetery, was then gradually applied to the others around Rome. The word thus came to mean a subterranean burial place dug out in the soft stone or tufa by the early Christians.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CATACOMBS HAS NOW BEEN THOROUGHLY INVESTIGATED

For many years it was commonly believed that they had been *sand-pits* from which, as the sand was extracted for building purposes, long passages and corridors were formed, which in the early ages of Christianity, the faithful used as places of refuge.

This opinion is no longer tenable. The great number of Catacombs are not dug out in the sandy soil, but hollowed out in the strata of soft stone common about Rome.

Moreover, sand-pits must of a necessity have been near the surface of the earth and they must have been so fashioned that the sand could be easily removed from them.

The Catacombs, on the other hand, are sunk deep in the earth—30, 40, or even 50 feet below the surface—and are reached by a steep stairway. They consist of long, narrow passages and corridors opening

out into crypts and chambers. These passages intersect each other at different angles, and the corridors so formed present a perfect labyrinth of ways and by-ways, shooting off for long distances and again branching off into a new maze of streets and cross streets. At intervals, shafts go down from the first set of chambers deeper into the ground and open into new and lower galleries, and others again, from these into still lower depths, so that two, three, and even more tiers of passages and chambers lie, one under the other, forming a very extensive underground city. It is not, therefore, conceivable that these should have originally served as sand-pits, as it would have been well-nigh impossible to extract sand from them in the large quantities required by Roman builders. The truth is that an entrance to the Catacombs was sometimes made through one of the sand-pits so as to avoid detection and to cover the retreat of those who entered. It is also possible that the sand-pits proper might have in the very first days of persecution furnished hiding places for the persecuted Christians, before they had time to prepare a refuge for themselves, as they did shortly afterwards.

The Catacombs, therefore, as we know them, were bored in the soft stone by the early Christians as places of burial for their dead, and for the living as places of refuge in time of persecution.

That they served admirably for these purposes is evident. Firstly, the entrance was carefully concealed. If this were discovered or its position made known by some traitor, the approach of an enemy was speedily discovered and frustrated by the faithful, who fled at the first alarm into the more hidden recesses, where pursuit was out of the question. For it needed not only

a perfect knowledge of the corridors, but the greatest circumspection to avoid being lost in the bewildering network of those dark passages, so closely resembling each other. Moreover, the corridors were so narrow that an excavator could in a few minutes throw up a barrier of sand and block them up effectually, thus rendering a chase absolutely impossible. As a final resource, some at least of the Catacombs were joined one with another by secret passages through which the fugitives could escape in an extreme necessity.

THE EXACT DATE OF THE FIRST CATACOMB IS NOT KNOWN

The pagans usually cremated their dead. This custom seems to have been abhorrent at all times to the Christians. Like the Jews, they preferred to bury their dead, according to the custom prevalent in Palestine, that is, in vaults cut out in the rock, such as we read of regarding the burial place of Lazarus. The Sepulchre which Joseph of Arimathea ceded for the burial of Our Lord was also hewn out of rock.

Since, however, the persecution started in the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68), and the Christians could not safely perform the burial services in the presence of their heathen enemies above ground, it is clear that from a very early date indeed they must have begun to hollow out these subterranean cemeteries. We have proofs of the existence of the Catacombs certainly as early as the reign of Domitian, A.D. 96.

It is not easy to divine where the Christians who died in Rome before this date were buried. No traces of such burial places are to be found, but it is surmised

that they were buried either in the Jewish cemetery, less abhorrent to them than pagan burial grounds, or that Roman converts who had private mausoleums allowed their new brethren to have a resting place in the immediate proximity of their own.

THE EXTENT OF THE CATACOMBS

The Catacombs are enormous in extent, and it is calculated that, if instead of being grouped around Rome they were stretched out in one direction, they should reach to a length of several hundred miles. Grave authorities tell us that six million Christians were buried in the Catacombs. The number is not excessive if we calculate that these cemeteries were in use upwards of 300 years and that in these 300 years 10 bloody persecutions were waged against the helpless Christians. Though the 60 Catacombs in the vicinity of Rome are the most famous, there are others scattered over different parts of Italy, France, Greece, Illyria, Africa and Asia Minor, all of which possess many notable archeological treasures.

WHY THE CATACOMBS WERE ABANDONED

The Catacombs were naturally abandoned when Constantine gave lasting peace to the Catholic Church. Hiding places were no longer required, and there was no further need for subterranean burial places. They were venerated however, and most justly so, as places of pilgrimage, for they were the hallowed resting places of the heroes and heroines whose names were in every mouth, whose memories were revered, whose combats

and triumphs were the glory and consolation of the Church and whose help was invoked in every need.

Thus they continued until Rome fell prey to the Goths and Lombards. These barbarous invaders, believing that vast treasures were hidden in the underground vaults, invaded the sacred precincts, broke open the tombs of the martyrs and scattered their dust on the ground.

The next phase in the history of the Catacombs was marked by the transference of the relics of the more famous martyrs to the great Basilicas and other Sanctuaries especially erected for them by the Roman Patricians. The Popes, desirous of depositing these precious remains in places more worthy of them and anxious to put before the eyes of the people the examples of those heroes and heroines of the Faith, proceeded to transfer thousands¹ of the bodies to above-ground churches, where they would be more accessible to the veneration of the faithful.

The Catacombs, thus despoiled of their richest treasures, became gradually less and less frequented and at last were entirely abandoned. Dirt and debris so blocked the entrances that in a short time all knowledge of their whereabouts was lost to the world, and it was only in the year 1578 that they were casually re-discovered. The Roman Pontiffs now became thoroughly alive to the vast importance of safeguarding them and appointed trustworthy custodians to watch over the treasures still enclosed in them.

The present procedure is as follows: Expert

1 In the cemetery of St. Callixtus, 174,000 martyrs and 45 saintly bishops were buried. Pope Pascal I alone is said to have translated to the Church of St. Praxedes 2,000 bodies!

workmen, directed by learned ecclesiastics, are appointed to make excavations. When a new discovery is made, work ceases until the competent authority arrives, and then a minute examination commences under the direction of specialists. Everything on the exterior of the sarcophagus is first carefully noted, after which the sarcophagus is opened for the examination of what may be found inside.

Satisfied that they are in the presence of the relics of a holy Martyr, those present fall on their knees and recite the prescribed prayers. Then follows diligent investigation, and every sign or emblem discovered is described in writing for the better elucidation of the history of the martyr.