

# HOLY SPIRIT CATHOLIC CHURCH & SCHOOL

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## OUR ST. PHILOMENA STORY

Do you know anybody named Philomena? Before learning of the young 13 year old martyr from the early Roman persecutions, I was aware of it but I don't believe I ever met anyone with that name. It's an unusual name that must have had its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the young saint became widely known and so, for a while anyway, it became a name that was given to many young girls of Catholic backgrounds. With the passage of time, however, its popularity waned and so it's now quite rare to find a girl with that name. But recently that changed for me, and a few others as well.



I now have met two young Philomena's. But, before I tell you about them, let me tell the story of how I became acquainted with the young Greek girl who became a Christian and then courageously died a martyr's death because of her loyalty to her God and her faith.

Some years ago, well before being called to the priesthood, I was given a cassette tape (remember cassettes?) on which an elderly priest, a Father O'Sullivan, related the story of an obscure little girl who was martyred a long time ago in Rome. The tape was about 90 minutes long and, to be honest, it was pretty dry. Nevertheless I decided to listen to it.

One winter morning, lying in bed, I played it. The good father droned on for a long time with all of the details of the short life of the young girl. I found myself slipping in and out of consciousness for quite some time until one moment when father said that the birthday of the girl was January 10<sup>th</sup>. I lingered there for a while longer on the edge of consciousness, and it began to dawn on me that it was January, but I wasn't quite sure what the date was. So I roused myself to get up and look for a calendar. And wouldn't you know it, it was January 10<sup>th</sup> -- It was St. Philomena's birthday. Well, that was special. What an interesting coincidence. I filed that little event away in my mind and while no real devotion developed, I always enjoyed telling that story to others.

One evening many years later, now a priest, I was in my first assignment at St. Joseph Parish in Howell, Michigan. I was having dinner at the home of a parishioner when I noticed on the refrigerator a holy card with St. Philomena's picture. Well, again, I didn't hesitate to launch into my story but when I got to the punch line, it occurred to me, again, that this was January. I asked what the date was. You guessed it. I suddenly realized that I had moved from the realm of mere coincidence and entered into a new level of reality.

Could it be that the little girl from so many years ago was trying to make a connection? Well shortly thereafter, I decided to tell my story to a Saturday morning mass crowd. As I told the story, I got the sense that something was going on. A young lady sitting in the first row began to giggle. I asked her later what that was about. She said that Philomena was her Confirmation name. Others that day, and soon afterward, began to come to me with similar connections. Many shared the same birthday or that it was the anniversary of some special event in their lives. And so, my relationship with the young virgin/martyr began to grow.



I was soon to discover that Philomena was a patron saint for difficult or impossible causes. She would share that title along with St. Jude and St. Rita of Cascia. But she was also a patroness of Catholic Schools. We had a school at St. Joseph and so we began to invoke her help with our various needs and concerns.

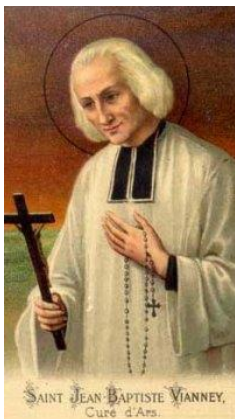
One of those concerns was that we were looking for a new principal. We went on a search and

interviewed several worthy candidates. They all looked pretty promising, so we puzzled over what to do. Finally on May 24<sup>th</sup> of 2002, the 200th anniversary of the discovery of the tomb of St. Philomena in the catacombs under Rome, our new principal accepted the job and peeked in the back door of the church as we were saying a school mass. She caught my eye up at the altar and gave me the "thumbs up". It was a great day for St. Joseph School.

There is yet another day of significance in the life of St. Philomena and that is August 11. This was her official feastday for many years but it was eventually superseded by the feast of St. Clare of Assisi. Perhaps the reason for this was that the Church has no official record of St. Philomena. She had no history. Nothing on paper as there is with Clare and Francis and most other saints. All we know officially about Philomena is that she lived, was a young girl, and was martyred. Her tomb showed indications of these few facts. There were three tablets that covered her grave but they were out of order. It said, "*Lumena, Pax Tecum Fi.*" It was rearranged to read, "*Pax Tecum, Filumena*" which translates from Latin as, "*Peace to you, Philomena*". As for the other details, they came from private revelations to Sister Luisa de Gesu in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that's where we got the information about her birthday.

That, along with many signs and wonders and miracles, has helped develop the cult of St. Philomena all around the world. And I suspect that there are many out there who have been given the special grace of having "met" her through some unusual, divine "coincidences" as I have.

I should also point out that one of the early members of that cult was the patron saint of Catholic Priests, St. John Vianney, the Curé d'Ars. He always gave her credit for all the wonders he performed. Another was Venerable Pauline Jaricot who was healed of a very serious illness through the intercession of the saint. In fact, it was her miraculous healing from serious heart problems that led to the beginning of Philomena's cause for sainthood.



Needless to say, I have brought my devotion to St. Philomena with me here to Holy Spirit Church. But apparently she was waiting for me. There was a picture on the principal's door that had been given to her but the school had no real knowledge of the girl saint. Ours was a small fledgling school that had a difficult time growing. We had been stuck at 60 students for many years and it seemed that we would need to have that dreaded discussion about closing our doors. We had prayed faithfully, but with no apparent progress. We regularly honored St. Philomena on her several feastdays but it appeared that she was not hearing us. One day, in frustration, I gave an ultimatum to our young

patroness. I said, "If you don't do something soon, we'll just have to find another saint to help us." And I said this publicly, at a school mass. "Philomena, if you're on our side, we need 75 students to make our school viable." And I gave her a deadline.

I'd like to actually call this technique "wrestling with God", as Jacob did in the Old Testament story. After all, it is God who really accomplishes these things through the intercession of his saints. There is also a precedent of this in one of the stories that came out of Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The locals made quite a fuss when their little saint seemed as if she was ignoring them. After all, their reputation was at stake. This was actually the Pauline Jaricot story. But, they "wrestled", got her attention, and their prayers were answered in a very timely fashion. And in the process they also learned something about how it all works. It's the standard test to see if we are really committed to having our prayers answered. Be persistent in prayer, the gospels say. "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." And, if need be, "wrestle" with God. Make your claims on His promises.



Well, as is often the case, prayers sometimes get answered at the last minute and after a bit of wrestling. At the beginning of the 2011 school year, we had gained about 10 more students. It was short of our goal of 75 but still quite an accomplishment considering that many Catholic schools were losing students in these difficult times. In a homily I expressed some cautious optimism and told the parishioners that I would keep them informed. (And did I mention that one of the first new school families had a little girl named Philomena who we knew would enter our Kindergarten?)

Well OK. But soon there would be more news. In the first week of that school year, we signed up 5 more students. One family recently moved here from Ohio and signed up two children for our school. They were #74 and #75. Charles, and his big sister. And guess what? Her name was Philomena. And what's more, she was 13 years old, the age of the saint when she was martyred. She was in the eighth grade and was with us for only that one year, and then

moved on, as if she was on a mission to assist us for a time with this encouraging sign. So, instead of talking about closing our little school, the conversation was changed to; "When are we going to build a new school?" \*

As part of my personal deal with Philomena, if she came through for us, I promised to lead a pilgrimage to Rome and Mugnano on or about May 24<sup>th</sup> of 2012 which was to be the 210<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the finding of her remains in the catacombs of Rome. That pilgrimage didn't materialize but I was able to go later in the year as part of the canonization of St. Kateri and six other saints on October 21<sup>st</sup>.



Our new school was built and dedicated by our bishop on January 10, 2015. (Oh, by the way, her feast day again.) While we still struggle with all the problems of running a Catholic school in difficult times, we are encouraged that we are not alone down here and that we have a great cloud of witnesses up there, who are ready, willing, and able to help us make it from one day, and one school year, to the next.

\*Another encouraging sign occurred during the building of our school. A dove showed up on the construction site one day and perched itself on one of the rafters as it was being hoisted into place by a crane. Wow! Even the carpenters were amazed that the Holy Spirit (represented by the dove) would show up and hang around the building site. We even got it on camera.

Our principal of thirteen years, Mrs. Anna Loewe, retired in 2017. Our new principal, Ms. Gwenis Laura came on board and hit the ground running. Until Covid hit. We currently have 70+ students enrolled and continue to look forward to increases under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, a lot of new houses in the neighborhood, and with the help of our dear little saint, Philomena.

We recently acquired a 1st class relic of our patroness and her assistance was requested for two individuals who were suffering from severe effects of Covid. In both cases the symptoms dramatically reversed. But here, at the outset, let me mention that the Church has a very narrow definition of a true miracle. In order for a healing event to have that designation, it has to be spontaneous, instantaneous, and a complete healing. Doctors have to say, "We don't have any natural explanation for what happened," Neither of these two stories fit that category but I still think that most people would say that they are at least miraculous in nature.

Let me relate the one that happened here. Patti, a former president of the parish council, and a very active church lady, lectured at the Sunday mass. By Wednesday of that week she was in the hospital, unconscious, intubated, and actively dying. Now I'm not sure if there was any connection, but shortly thereafter I got my bug and spent the next two weeks sleeping. That was the extent of my symptoms. This was Holy Week and I had to get a sub for both Palm Sunday and The Easter Triduum. But I got a phone call from a priest in Detroit who knew of my devotion to St. Philomena and that I had been looking for a first class relic of hers. He said, I have one for you. Do you want it? Well of course I wanted it. I arranged to have it picked up and, wanting to 'test her out', immediately arranged to have her sent to Patti's room. The next day her symptoms reversed. Doctors were dumbfounded and nurses were crying, and promising to return to the practice of their faith. They claimed there was a peace in Patti's room that they didn't experience in the other patient's rooms. She spent much more time in the hospital recuperating and enduring therapy, but she is now back again in the parish lecturing and being a grandma.



So, please stop by and visit her. Say a prayer. Miracles do happen!

If you would like to contribute to our cause of making solid Catholic education to all children in our community, we would be greatly appreciative. See our Homepage, where you have an option for Online Giving. Thank you and God Bless.

Fr. John Rocus

Holy Spirit Church & School

Brighton, Michigan. USA

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