

*RMS Special 1st Anniversary Release: The
Story of St. Philomena*

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"The Wonderworker" — Saint Philomena, Virgin and Martyr

Saint Philomena was born in Macedonia in 289 A.D., to parents who had long been childless—until their conversion to the Catholic Faith. They were baptized on the same day as their Princess daughter. She was a beautiful child, spiritually as well as physically, and her main guide in the spiritual life was an old servant woman who took special care to form little Philomena to be a saint. This diligent upbringing resulted in our dear Saint consecrating herself solely to Christ soon after her First Holy Communion, a great joy to the old servant.

Saint Philomena's heroines were the virgin martyrs, especially Saint Agnes, who had won her victory only a short time before. One evening, she was blessed with a vision. She saw the martyrs themselves, "clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands"—and Saint Agnes at their head. That saint gestured to Philomena to come and join them. But between them was the sea, and a dragon blocked

her way.

Later Saint Philomena told the old servant about her dream, who read to her from the Scriptures. Then she interpreted the dream, telling her young charge that she had seen the martyrs, and expressing the hope that Philomena would gain the victory over the dragon (the devil) and the "sea of tribulation".

This Philomena was to do, for shortly after word came that Galerius, son-in-law of the Emperor Diocletian, and notorious persecutor of the Christians, had his greedy, conquering eyes set upon Philomena's homecity of Nicopolis, of which her father was the governor. The news threw the city authorities into a panic, and it was decided that the governor himself should go to Rome, to appeal to the Emperor Diocletian. It was a dangerous mission, almost suicidal, and Philomena's mother decided she would accompany her husband. Naturally, Philomena ended up accompanying them as well.

They arrived in Rome, in early July, 302 A.D., and straightaway made an appointment with the Emperor. When the time came, and Philomena and her parents were granted an audience, it was like a meeting of the forces of good and evil. Diocletian was the very definition of the word "evil": proud and cruel to the point of insane. His persecution of the Christians would be remembered as the worst and most brutal, and he himself as one of the most disgusting and impious characters of history.

On the other hand, Saint Philomena, now thirteen, made her graceful, queenly entry in a pure white gown, the symbol of innocence. Her natural beauty—which was exceptional—was enhanced by her spiritual beauty, which was even more remarkable. Her consecrated purity shone forth in her bright and modest face, and innocence radiated from her every feature. She attracted the attention and admiration of everyone present—including the Emperor himself. As Philomena's father, the governor, began speaking to the Emperor, pleading for his city and his people, Diocletian contented himself with looking at the governor's daughter. His rude staring made the princess uncomfortable, and until the proceedings had finished she stared at the floor in turn.

But then Diocletian did something completely unexpected. He agreed to spare the city—but in return, he asked for the beautiful young princess in marriage.

There was a stunned silence in the audience room, and then Philomena's father gained the courage to ask if the Emperor really meant it. Diocletian *did* mean it, and the two parents were overwhelmed with gratitude. Of course he could marry their daughter! That would mean prosperity and happiness for her, and honor and distinction for her parents. They agreed readily, and then it was only left for the princess to give her consent.

But Diocletian was a pagan, not to mention a persecutor of the Christians, and he had already been

married multiple times. Besides this, Philomena had consecrated herself to God, and her whole being revolted at the proposal. She struck the court into yet another stunned silence by her answer. "O mother, I cannot say yes!"

Horrified, her parents attempted to persuade her to accept the offer, but Philomena remained firm. She hated to hurt her parents, but she knew that this was a situation in which she could not yield.

The Emperor then pressed his case, striving to win over the thirteen-year-old princess by promises of great riches, but to no avail. Then he resorted to threats, and finally had Philomena thrown into the dungeon, despite her parents' attempts to protect her. Here, alone, Philomena realized the decision that lay before her. Either a spiritual death or a physical one. She wept, and then turned to God in prayer, begging him for aid and courage. Comforted by communication with her Divine Spouse, she then fell asleep, and the dream she had had three years before returned.

Saint Agnes approached her, dressed in a white robe and carrying a palm like the others. Bending down, she told Philomena, "Dost thou not know me, dear sister? I am Agnes, the Spouse of Jesus Christ. Soon thou, too, wilt join us." Philomena lifted her hands to the vision, and Saint Agnes smiled. But then suddenly Philomena found herself awake once more, with the Emperor laughing before her.

She screamed, but there was no one to help her, so she resorted to prayer while Diocletian strove to change her mind. He laughed in derision as she called: "Jesus, help!" But then, when he took her arm and held it, he shouted in pain and fury. Jesus had come to Philomena's aid. Baffled, Diocletian left her, and ordered her to be chained. She spent the next thirty-seven days in that state, and then was blessed with a vision—this time, of the Blessed Mother, bearing the Infant Jesus in her arms.

The Blessed Virgin identified herself, then encouraged Philomena to continue in her resistance. "...I came to announce to thee a glad message. Three days more, and thy captivity ends. But a great trial awaits thee before then: have courage, however, for in the hour of tribulation my Son's grace shall mightily assist thee..." She then told her that the angel Gabriel would be her special protector. "...Therefore be of good cheer! Already the angels await thy coming and thy Spouse is ready to meet thee." Then Philomena was allowed to hold the little Child in her own arms, and He embraced her. Philomena was filled with a supernatural joy.

Meanwhile, Philomena's enemies were making plans to subdue her. Diocletian had at this point given up, and that very evening, he ordered that Philomena should be scourged the next day. "I think I shall condemn her to receive the same punishment which Pontius Pilate decreed for the Nazarene: I shall have her scourged. It is the most ignominious and cruel of all tortures. If she survives we shall still

have time for further proceedings against her."

"If she survives"—but no one was expecting Philomena to be cured overnight, which is what happened. Diocletian, above all, was amazed, and did not hesitate to claim that the pagan deity Jupiter had cured her so that she might become his wife. Philomena in turn lost no time in enlightening him, informing him that, instead of Jupiter, He whom Diocletian called the "Nazarene" had restored her to health and beauty, and that Diocletian had better amend his ways before God's judgement fell hard upon him. Diocletian was infuriated.

Torture after torture followed. Philomena was thrown into the Tiber river—a drowning attempt which ended in the executioners being frightened out of their wits by a glorious spectre being lifted from the stormy waters by angels and following them to shore—and shot with arrows—again being cured. Incredulous, Diocletian demanded to see the last trial repeated, but this time the archers could not even hit the princess. Diocletian mocked them, but they showed him the bloody arrows from the previous attempt, and claimed that Philomena was resorting to sorcery. In result, the arrows were made red-hot, on the theory that witches' power was useless against fire. But this time, the arrows turned back, horribly injuring the archers, and killing six of them. Diocletian and his counselors were confounded, and the audience either fled or professed their belief in Christ. Then it was suggested to Diocletian to have the princess pierced with a lance. The Emperor

offered her once last chance; Philomena retorted that Diocletian was past believing, and that she was ready and waiting to receive the death-blow and be united with her Spouse.

Diocletian jeered, and the preparations were made. Philomena laid her head down upon the block, and prayed. "Come, O Jesus, Spouse of my soul!"

One stroke with the lance, and Philomena fell. Diocletian laughed triumphantly, claiming that he had won, but in fact he had not won. Saint Philomena had gone to her heavenly reward, joining the virgins, dressed in white, with palms in their hands. It was 3:00 P.M. on a Friday—the same hour and day at which her beloved Jesus had died on the cross—11 August, 302 A.D. Saint Philomena had won the victory, and so had the "Nazarene". Good triumphed against evil, as it shall do for all eternity.

Fifteen centuries later, when Diocletian was long gone, Saint Philomena's relics were discovered in the Catacombs of Saint Priscilla, Via Salaria, Rome, on 25 May 1802. No one knew who she was, but carved on her tomb were the words **Lumena in pace Fi**, a scourge, an anchor, an arrow, two arrows reversed, a lily, and a palm. Inside were found the martyr's bones, and a vial of her blood, which changed colors—a miracle. Later, those who now claim Saint Philomena never existed, would claim that this vial was instead filled with some sort of perfume. They have yet to explain the miracle of its changing color.

Saint Philomena's devotion spread quickly, especially as the Curé d'Ars, Saint John Vianney, was specially devoted to her. She revealed her story to three different people in 1836. But perhaps the strongest proof of her existence is the many miracles she has worked. Saint Philomena came to be known as the "Wonderworker of the Nineteenth Century", but even today, she never ceases to intercede for her devotees. Like Saint Agnes, this thirteen-year-old girl who exchanged worldly distinction and pleasure for eternal happiness is a beautiful example for us to follow.

Saint Philomena, powerful with God, pray for us!