

PHILOMENA

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For decades after her bones were found in Rome's catacombs, Philomena was thought to have been a martyr. Many miracles were attributed to her and she developed a huge following. Then archaeologists determined that she was probably an ordinary girl who died of natural causes.



All that is known about Philomena fits in one sentence: she was a 13- to 15-year-old girl whose bones were discovered in 1802 in Rome's Catacombs of Priscilla. A Latin inscription on tiles at her tomb read, "Peace be with you, Philomena." The evidence seemed to suggest she had been martyred. Her remains were bundled up and sent to the Vatican for storage.

A few years later, a priest from Naples came across her relics and was unaccountably filled with joy. Philomena's remains were moved to his church and there were several miraculous cures at her altar. Her many devotees included canonized saints: John Vianney, Frances X. Cabrini and John Neumann. Then scientific advances allowed closer research. The "Philomena" tiles were from another tomb; the relics belonged to a girl who died 100 years *after* persecution of Christians ended in Rome. She was not a martyr.

Philomena's story raises hard questions: what are miracles? Do they require the intervention of martyrs and canonized saints? If they do, the works attributed to Philomena were not hers or were not miracles. Maybe people were imagining things. Maybe the relics belonged to another martyr. Maybe we ought to rethink what it means to be a saint. ... Or maybe miracles are not the work of saints, but the work of our own faith. Wrestling with those questions and finding honest answers is another step toward conversion – toward turning our lives over to God.



"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Albert Einstein

"It is not miracles that make a realist turn to religion. A true realist will, if he is an unbeliever, always find the strength and the ability not to believe in a miracle, and if faced with a miracle as an undeniable fact, he will sooner disbelieve his own senses than admit the fact. And if he does admit it, he will admit it as a natural fact hitherto unknown to him. In a realist, faith does not arise from a miracle, but the miracle from faith."

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

**"Miracles are not contrary to nature,
but only contrary to what we know about nature."**

Augustine

"The special quality of the miracle is that, because of the entire context within which an incident of this kind takes place, God himself wishes to communicate something to us in the miracle – in it, he really addresses us. There is an intention in the event and this personal intention transcends the normal possibilities of nature. For anyone who is open and listens to it, the natural event expresses more than it is able to express in itself – it is the visible aspect of the free act of God."

Edward Schillebeeckx

Philomena is remembered on August 11.

'An ordinary experience made extraordinary'

"Each and every miracle is an ordinary situation made extraordinary. They are ordinary life situations in which God's power and grace are made known to us. And each time a person witnesses God's power and grace, that power and grace is a moment of extravagance, of excess. ... There's excitement, there's awe, there's a 'mouth open' and 'scratch your head, how'd they do that' kind of experience. Because a miracle opens us up to what God does all the time, and changes the way we see and experience ourselves, each other, our world, and our God.

"So, that's a miracle in a nutshell: an ordinary experience made extraordinary; something that happens all the time that all of a sudden we see in a new way. A moment of God's power and grace. A moment when God goes overboard. And a moment when we look at the ordinary things and people in life in a whole new way. ...

"We are the instruments of God's grace in the midst of desperate situations. Christ takes what we have to offer, and transforms and multiplies it so that it meets the needs of others. We are caught up in God's abundant grace in meeting the needs of the world. ... Look around you with compassionate eyes and a compassionate heart; His eyes and His heart. Miracles are just waiting to happen! Jesus says: I will be with you! And you and I together? It's enough."

The Rev. Gene Robertson, Archdiocese of St. Louis,
on his web site, www.fugentus.com



"Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see."

C.S. Lewis

"People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air but to walk on Earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child – our own two eyes. All is a miracle."

Thich Nhat Hanh

"Where there is great love there are always miracles."

Willa Cather

"Any sunset or oak tree or baby or pretty girl is a fantastic and unbelievable, unassimilable miracle if seen for the first time, or if seen as if for the first time (or as if for the last time), as a good artist sees or as any good experimenter sees. This fresh and defamiliarized experiencing becomes easy for any person as soon as he has sense enough to realize that it is more fun to live in a world of miracles than in a world of filing cabinets and that a familiar miracle is still a miracle."

Abraham Maslow

"There are no miracles for those who have no faith in them."

French Proverb

"Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to. Just because things don't turn out the way you want them to the first time – you have to keep believing."

Doris (Maureen O'Hara) in *Miracle on 34th Street*

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION

1. Thomas Aquinas said miracles are God's intervention in the laws of nature. Some go to the other extreme, arguing that miracles happen all around us every day. Pablo Picasso drolly agreed. "All of life is a miracle," he said. "It is a miracle we don't dissolve in our bathwater like a lump of sugar." Which view fits your outlook most closely? Could there be truth in both?
2. Rev. Robertson says miracles are moments in which God's grace is made known to us. He argues that as instruments of God's grace, each of us can work miracles. How can *you* do this?

