



Kiwi prisoners of Saint Philomena

Another patron of hopeless and impossible causes, a fourth-century saint is prayed to by many Catholics. PAT BARRETT and his daughter visit the Italian sanctuary of the martyr's relics and have a strange experience.



Clockwise, from top left: St Philomena; Anna-Marie Barrett, Fr Brasschi (shrine rector) and Pat Barrett at Mugnano Station; Church of Our Lady of Grace, sanctuary of St Philomena's relics.

There are three of them, and they have been carefully scanning the benches at the bus stop for a likely victim. My daughter, Anna-Marie, and I are in the frenetic Piazza Garibaldi, outside Naples Railway Station in Italy, on the way to Mugnano del Cardinale and the Sanctuary of St Philomena, a fourth-century virgin and martyr. Pilgrimages are never easy, the difficulties all being part of the journey of faith, and our resolve is about to be tested, again.

We missed the earlier bus by seconds; it roared off as we ran up behind it, the driver never even seeing us, and a two-hour wait ensued. The bus to Mugnano finally chugs up and there is a rush for the door.

The robbers move in. One clammers aboard – then, feigning a lost ticket, he begins to descend against the human tide; it's a practised ploy. I push Anna-Marie on, and, with my attention diverted, an accomplice slips his hand into my shirt pocket. Noticing his intention I clap my hand to the targeted

pocket; he withdraws in mock horror, uttering a stream of Italian together with, "Permisso, permisso" (pardon, pardon). We push on, find a seat, and collapse into its security and comfort.

The road to Mugnano unfolds before us, an interesting route into the hill country north of Mount Vesuvius. It is another two hours – and night not far off – before we disembark and walk the final 500m to the imposing Church of Our Lady of Grace, housing the relics of St Philomena. There's no-one in the church when we enter, but the sanctuary light is burning, denoting the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, which is always comforting, and soon we find the special altar devoted to our saint and her precious mortal remains. It is a great joy and privilege to be here and we reflect on the remarkable life of this young martyr who was just 13 when she died.

Hers is an extraordinary story of hope, suffering and faith, which set a precedent for saints in the history of the Catholic Church; she is the only one to



have been canonised by virtue of her miraculous intercession alone. Nothing historical of her life is known, aside from her name, discovered on the walls of her tomb in the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, and evidence of her martyrdom.

Philomena's tomb caught the attention of the excavators who discovered it in 1802 as it was sealed with terra cotta slabs, which are usually a sign of nobility or great martyrdom. The slabs were inscribed with an anchor, arrows, lance and a lily: signs of her virginity and the means by which she was martyred. Her story continued with the enshrining of her remains at Mugnano in 1805 after which miraculous cures and favours, through her intercession, began to multiply to such an extent that she earned the title, Philomena, Powerful with God.

In 1837 she was canonised by Pope Gregory XVI as the "Wonder-Worker of the 19th Century". Numerous Popes have had great devotion to her, among them Pope Leo XIII and Pope St Pius X, along with Saint Peter Chanel and Blessed Anna-Marie Taigi. Her most noted devotee was St John Vianney, the Cure of Ars. No stranger to mystical phenomena, the Cure bought about many miracles among his parishioners, all of which he attributed to the intercession of St Philomena.

She has become another patron of hopeless and impossible causes, and like St Rita and St Jude, her help is invoked for every possible need among the faithful.

We, too, have brought petitions, some personal, others carried on behalf of friends and family, which we leave at her altar. The shrine itself is unusual as it displays a cast of the little saint inside a sealed casket, with a window, above the altar. The cast contains her bones.

We are disturbed by the entrance of Father Brasschi, rector of the shrine; he hurries to meet "the pilgrims from New

Zealand". We manage to exchange a few greetings and then are shown to our quarters by his secretary, Maria. The pilgrim house, in a converted prison, is accessed directly from the sanctuary; the four floors of cells now house inmates of a different breed.

Maria hurries us past barred gates and along the stone-cold passages of the prison, which, like the church, is around 300 years old. The windowless passages are lit by sensor lights, which activate after we step out into the darkness. The cold is intense, almost palpable. At the end of the first-floor passage we enter our room. It's spartan but comfortable, with an ensuite and three beds. Are we expecting a visitor?

We are the only ones staying this night, amid four floors of cells. I quickly open the window, more bars, but a sense of relief to see the outside world. Dinner is at 8pm in the old prison cafeteria; dining alone we eat quickly and return to our room for a good night's sleep.

Prayer comes easily in such surroundings. Ours are intense because I have sensed an unpleasant presence in the corridor beyond our door, which we have locked, key still in place, whatever good that will do.

In the morning, as we rise, I ask Anna-Marie how she slept. "Well, thanks Dad, but I woke up cold in the wee hours and found that big rug you had put over me had been taken off and placed, folded, on the end of my bed."

A visitor had indeed come in from the cold. ☐ Naples can be reached in two hours on daily trains from Termini Station in Rome.

☐ A train to Avellino from Naples is the best option, with a short bus trip necessary from there to the Sanctuary.

☐ Further information on St Philomena can be found at www.philomena.it

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