

SISTER PHILOMENA

OF THE HOLY FACE

McCANN



BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:

JULY 18, 1900

BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:

JULY 18, 1998

Sister Philomena McCann
Province of U.S.A. & Canada
1900 –1998

"Looking back on my life, I am most grateful to God for the gift of my vocation. I have prayed night and day to know God's will and have always believed that God would show me the way." These were the words of Sister Philomena McCann as she celebrated her 70th year of religious profession. She was a religious imbued with the spirit of Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey whose sole desire was to do what God wanted. Her whole life was a trusting, loving "Yes".

Josephine McCann was born into a large family in Belfast, Northern Ireland on July 18, 1900. Her mother died when she was quite young. Much to her father's regret she left school at an early age and went to work in a linen factory. While still a teenager she longed to become a sister but thought herself unworthy of such a noble calling. Eventually when she was twenty two years of age she was invited to come to Mount Sackville for a few days. She responded to the invitation joyfully and never returned home. In later life she often pondered how painful that must have been for her dear father, her brothers and her sisters. The novitiate opened in Ferbane and Josephine McCann and five companions donned the postulants' outfit on March 17, 1923. Josie was received on September 21st and received the name of Sister Philomena. She left Ireland for the Mother House, Paris on March 24, 1924 and made her first vows there on September 8, 1925.

Even though Sister Philomena had a deep desire to be a Sister from an early age, at the time of her profession there were still moments in which she questioned her actions. In later life she recalled: "After pronouncing my vows I began to wonder ... Do I really have a vocation? Am I doing God's Will? Joy filled my soul to overflowing when I received my first obedience. From that day on I have never had the slightest doubt of my vocation!"

In looking for a congregation to enter, Josephine McCann looked for a missionary order. She wanted to go to India. While never quite making it that far, she certainly proved herself to be a great missionary and a true daughter of Blessed Anne Marie. No situation proved too difficult for her. Her ministry of presence and prayer was indeed an inspiration to all.

Sister Philomena's first obedience took her to a boarding school in Girvan, Scotland, a place she held dear to her heart all her life. Here she spent twenty-one years working in the kitchen. By degrees she learned culinary arts and began to serve delicious meals to the community, the boarders at the school and any guests who visited. Her great ability to laugh at herself was apparent as she told stories of those early days. She would tell of a time when in all the fuss of preparing breakfast with Mother Superior looking over her shoulder, she broke the eggs into the trash and began frying the shells! And then there was the time when she was preparing sausages and left them, still linked, on the table while she was busy doing other preparations. Great was her amazement to see the sausages not only moving but disappearing around the corner in the dog's mouth!! Undaunted, Sister Philomena, being a practical down-to-earth person was quick to find something else to put in the pot.

When she thought she would be spending the rest of her life in Girvan, behold, the Lord called her to the United States of America where she was a founding member of a new beginning in Philadelphia in 1947. Here she brought the same enthusiasm and creativity to her work as she did in Girvan.

After spending three years in Philadelphia, the Lord had yet another mission for His loyal friend. She became a founding member, once again, this time in Manville, Rhode Island. Her catering expertise was once more at the service of all those who came to the Retreat Center. The work was intense and the working quarters were very cramped. The living area for the sisters left much to be desired, as they lived in the attic where the heat of the summer and the cold of

the winter penetrated every corner. The language spoken was French, and although Sister Philomena could speak and understand the language, nevertheless, it was not her native tongue and it was not easy for her to communicate. However, her deep spirit of faith and her indomitable sense of humor once again came to her rescue and in later years she told many an amusing story of misrepresentations and misunderstanding in her dealings with people.

Sister Philomena remained in Manville until it closed in 1958, when California became the field of her ministry. There, she ministered to the communities of Wilmington and Torrance until she retired in 1979. Here, she brought the same inventiveness to her work, and many a tasty meal she prepared. The poor people in the vicinity and the "shut-ins" were also recipients of her art and she became famous for her lemon meringue pies. Sister Aine Power remembers her welcoming presence in Saint Catherine's, Torrance. "Sister Philomena's kindness and pleasant way with those who visited her at the kitchen back door stands out. She always had a few kind words and a treat in her pocket for the little folks." This kindness and hospitality was always evident as Sister Philomena ministered to both sisters and visitors through her hours of labor in the kitchen. She loved people, young and old and never sent anyone away without help, a kind word or whatever it was they needed. In 1978 she returned to Rhode Island. Her adaptability was most apparent in the next few years. She was in Stella Maris in Newport, in St. Johns and St. Margaret's in Providence before coming to Cluny Convent in Newport, where she spent the last years of her life.

Sister Philomena enjoyed wonderful Jubilee celebrations and lived to celebrate her seventieth. She had the joy of visiting the Mother House and Lourdes with her two sisters - Sister Malachy and Sister Madeleine – who were also members of the Congregation. It was fun to see the three of them, all tiny people, trotting all over and enjoying one company.

When St. Margaret's Home closed, Sister Philomena continued to write to some of the women who had been convalescing there. It gave her great joy to be able to bring a little happiness to their lives. She also began writing to prisoners, and in no uncertain terms she encouraged them to reform their lives and trust in God. Even after they were released they continued their correspondence.

Sister Philomena gave great edification by her service in the community. A sister who knew her in her later years reminisces: "I can still see her sitting in the community room very content and happy. She always had such a welcoming smile when I met her. She loved to engage in conversation and was interested in everyone and everything. She had a wonderful sense of humor and could tell a story from her past with such detail and clarity as if it had just happened the day before.

Community was very important for Sister Philomena and she related to everyone in a very individual way. She was interested in everything that was going on and was eager to hear all about school and its activities. When the children were involved in any kind of a performance she loved to be present. The simple things of life gave her great delight and she was always so grateful for them."

She was very much at home in Newport and her great joy was to go for walks in the beautiful environment. She had great health all her life and one of her greatest crosses was when a fall, incurring a broken hip, curtailed her walking activity. After that, nothing gave her more pleasure than a ride by the ocean. "Open the windows and let in God's fresh air," would be her request, and then she would praise God for the beauty of all her surroundings and inhale the fresh air with a prayer of gratitude. Once, the day after a ferocious hurricane, when the wind and sea were still riled, a friend of the community took her and two other sisters to see the sea. Sister Philomena absolutely had to get out of the car to "feel" the storm! Her friend went around to her side of the car and, hugging her, helped her out and hung on to her so that she would not blow away into the ocean. When she got

home she told the others, "That was the best trip to the sea!" She really did enjoy those rides and always expressed her gratitude to the driver. Very often the rides ended up in Baskin Robbins for her favorite ice cream - maple walnut!

Sister Philomena, always a prayerful person, spent many hours in the chapel praying for those who confided intentions to her. The Mass held a very special place in her life, and when she was unable to attend she followed the Liturgy faithfully on the television. She had a beautiful singing voice which remained clear and sweet up to her last days. She had her own favorite hymns and liked to sing them after Night Prayer. She loved the songs to Blessed Anne Marie, St. Joseph and never forgot the French hymns of her Novitiate days. Even in the Nursing Home she enchanted everyone with Irish songs, especially Danny Boy.

As time went by Sister Philomena became weaker. Her deteriorating eyesight prevented her from writing or reading. Her legs, as she used to say, "don't want to go where I want!" Fiercely independent she reluctantly accepted the use of a wheelchair. Then when her condition became such that she could no longer receive complete care in the community, because of a stroke, she was received into St. Clare's Nursing Home, a Catholic nursing facility under the care of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit in Newport. This break with the community was very difficult for Sister Philomena. The sisters were faithful in visiting her daily, and her greatest joy was to be wheeled into the chapel where Holy Mass was celebrated and to know that one of her sisters was by her side.

Her deep appreciation for even the smallest kindness done echoed in her many daily thank yous. One example of her faith was her fidelity to her task in the kitchen for many years, though she never did like to cook. Her spirit of faith was an inspiration to the many who lived with her and had been touched through her ministry. Sister Regina Brunelle captures the thoughts of many when she stated: "That spirit of faith is what always impressed me about Sister Philomena. Her

direct, straightforward, no-nonsense approach to life always led her to God in both the small and large everyday events of her life. This has been the secret of her serenity and peace. She truly understood the meaning of Anne Marie Javouhey's exhortation that her Sisters be contemplatives in action."

In July of 1998, Sister Philomena experienced another stroke, and her condition became very weak. She was surrounded by the sisters during her last days and received all the prayers and consolations of the Church. On the evening of July 18, 1998, on her 98th birthday, the sisters were by her side in prayer and quietly and peacefully Sister Philomena gave her soul back to God. "When God meets me," she once said, "He'll say, 'Ah Josephine McCann, you've come home at last.'"