



STORIES OF SAINTS

AND THE

SACRAMENTS

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Stories of Saints and the Sacraments

Marie Paul Curley, FSP, and Mary Lea Hill, FSP

With a Foreword by Father John Riccardo



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*For our loved ones who have gone before us
and are part of the great company of saints, especially:*

Stanley R. Curley

and

Lee J. Hill

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Foreword

Some years ago while in prayer I had an experience of being inside some sort of stadium. The stands were full, and everyone was wearing white. It looked and sounded like what is called a “white out” on college campuses when they host a nighttime football game. The stadium was packed, the people in the stands were cheering, and the noise was deafening, but in a very good and positive way. As the experience in prayer continued, I felt as though I heard the Lord say to me, “John, that’s heaven.” The Spirit quickly took me to the Letter to the Hebrews, where in chapter 12 the author compares our lives to being inside something like a stadium, “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” as we run the race that is the game of life.

As anyone knows who has ever been to a college football game, fans don’t go to a game just to watch it; they go to help change the outcome. Thousands of cheering fans have the effect of inspiring players on the field to do things that far surpass what they could ever do on a practice field with no one watching.

This image has helped me immensely with regard to what we call “the Communion of Saints.” For many Catholics, perhaps, the

saints are just names from the past, people who lived long ago, but with whom we have no real interaction. Such is not the case. The saints are alive! And, like the people in the stands at a football game, they're not just watching us. The saints are, even now, cheering us on when we feel weak, interceding for us to evangelize and recreate this world as they did theirs, and eager for us to join them in the life that is to come. We are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses!"

In the rich pages that follow, Sister Marie Paul Curley and Sister Mary Lea Hill help us better know some of these witnesses with whom we are probably slightly familiar and learn about saints previously unknown to us. While most of us know something about the conversion and life of Saint Paul or Saint Augustine, and are aware that Saint Cecilia is the patron saint of music, I imagine few of us have ever even heard of Saint Lorenzo Ruiz or Saint Peter To Rot. When the Communion of Saints is brought to life through insightful and short biographies, we not only learn more about these heroes in our family but are also encouraged to be conscious of their mighty intercession and to call upon it more intentionally.

Even as for some Catholics the Communion of Saints can be a mere line in the Creed that we recite on Sunday, for many of us the sacraments can easily become mere rituals. This can be a great danger, especially for those of us who are ordained. Nothing is worse than getting used to the *magnificent*—and the sacraments are just that: magnificent. Oh, they are rituals, to be sure, but there is nothing "mere" about them!

Especially on the heels of the National Eucharistic Revival in our country, we are living in a time when the Church is being invited to reclaim an ever greater awareness of, and awe at, what

happens when a person is baptized, confirmed, joined in holy Matrimony, anointed, ordained a ministerial priest, receives the astounding grace that is God's forgiveness, or feeds on the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus in the Eucharist.

For example, Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist for a reason. There is something he longs to see transpire in us as we feed upon him. Unlike the other food we consume, the Eucharist breaks us down, or at least Jesus desires for this to happen in us, so that we can truly become more like what (or Whom) we eat. We receive a sacramental "blood transfusion" every time we receive Communion! His own Precious Blood rushes into our hearts, wanting and empowering them to turn from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh, and enabling us—who live in a culture and world so often filled with anger, division, resentment, and unforgiveness—to become agents of reconciliation and healing.

Saint Elizabeth Seton, as we'll see in the pages that follow, is a wondrous and hopeful example of how this happened to her and can happen in you and in me. When she entered into full communion with the Church, she experienced abandonment and betrayal by those who had been closest to her. Yet the Eucharist served not only to overwhelm her with God's intimate nearness and love for her, it also gave her the grace and strength to forgive those who had caused her so much pain. Moreover, it provided supernatural strength for setting out on the mission to which God uniquely called her.

The saints we read about in the pages that follow were destined to live when and where they did. To each of them, God gave a unique and personal mission, and their faith and the power of the sacraments enabled them to understand and faithfully carry out those missions. As it was with them, so it is with us. Nobody

is alive by chance; we don't just happen to be here. Just as it was with the saints, you and I have been created by God for these days in which we live. Like them, he has created us for friendship with himself and with others, and like them he has created us for a mission. I pray that the stories of these great men and women and how they were transformed and sustained by the sacraments will rouse us to become saints ourselves in our day and age. May this cloud of witnesses, who even now cheer us on, inspire us to become ever more magnanimous, to desire to be great and to do great things—not for ourselves and our own glory, but for God and the good of those all around us who live the nightmare that is life without God.

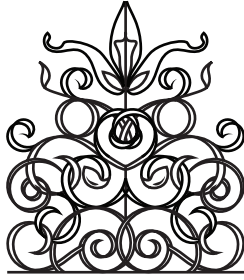
FATHER JOHN RICCARDO

Authors' Note

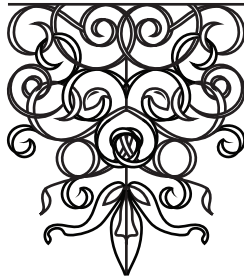
The lives and backgrounds of the saints in this series were carefully researched. To depict key events of their lives in a dramatized way, we extrapolated from the research on each saint to provide details and dialogue that seemed likely.

The additional biographical information, along with the personal challenge and prayer, are intended as prompts that can inspire you to reflect in a deeper way on your call to holiness. The Reader's Guides, found at the end of the book, provide discussion questions and additional resources on the grace of the sacraments in the lives of each of these saints. These guides can be used for individual reflection or in a group.

The saints were ordinary human beings who, like ourselves, had gifts and shortcomings. They are saints because of how they responded to God's graced invitations: with extraordinary love. We hope that, through these stories, you will enjoy getting to know them as much as we did.



BAPTISM





Saint Paul

Apostle of Christ Crucified

BORN: ca. BC 6, Tarsus or Galilee

DIED: ca. AD 67, Rome

FEAST DAYS: January 25—Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul; June 29—Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

PATRON: missionaries, evangelists, writers, tentmakers, rope makers, protection against hailstorms and snakes

The young Saul of Tarsus decisively strode through the temple precincts. Stephen, a vocal follower of the New Way, had just been brought before the Sanhedrin, and Saul didn't want to miss the confrontation. He needed to know more about this New Way, so he could understand its hold over the minds and hearts of the less educated.

"What right have they," he thought, "to replace our God-given Law with the ideas of some crazy rabbi who ended up crucified?" The scandal of it infuriated Saul. These people were tarnishing the messianic expectations with beliefs in a false messiah who, instead of establishing the Kingdom of God, had suffered the

shameful death of crucifixion. Saul couldn't understand the appeal that devout Jews were finding in the teachings left by such a disreputable rabbi.

Originally from Tarsus, Saul had been drawn to Jerusalem by his desire to deepen his knowledge and love for the one true God. As a Pharisee, he had delighted in studying the Law and had dedicated his life to a close observance of the Law. Now Saul found the claims of Stephen's false messiah so disturbing that he even found himself at odds with his mentor, the revered and wise Rabbi Gamaliel. Gamaliel wanted to let the new movement die out on its own. Saul disagreed. Couldn't Gamaliel see how fast the errors were spreading? Some action should be taken!

Saul shouldered his way through the crowd, so he could hear and see everything. Stephen was forcefully making his case, quoting the Scriptures. He certainly was logical and eloquent, Saul admitted to himself. But then Stephen shouted, "I see the heavens open and the glory of God revealed, and the Son of Man on the right hand of the Father!"

Saul felt his gut clench at the blasphemy—Stephen was claiming that this rabbi Jesus was equal to God! He shouted out his indignation: "Blasphemy!"

Cries of "stone him!" filled the courtroom. The angry energy of the mob swept through Saul and even the Sanhedrin.

Some of the younger men took hold of Stephen and rushed him away to be stoned outside the Temple, which could not be defiled. Saul followed, fiercely glad that something was finally being done to stop these insults against God by those who claimed to believe in him.

When they arrived at the pit, the mob threw Stephen down into it. Everyone scrambled to pick up a rock, to take part in this

purge of heresy. The doubts that Gamaliel had planted in Saul deterred him from hurling stones, but he showed his approval by watching over the cloaks of his companions.

He watched as Stephen fell to his knees and prayed aloud, “Lord, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing!” And Saul kept watching until the stones brought their target completely to the ground, and Stephen prayed aloud one last time, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” That name again—Saul wanted to eradicate its haunting power from the earth. Yet as Stephen lapsed into stillness, something about the confident peace on his face disturbed the young Pharisee.

He pushed his misgivings aside as he returned his friends’ cloaks. “These people are blasphemers, putting this Jesus at the side of God! We need to keep our momentum going. We need to destroy this New Way!”

Saul did not attempt to stone other followers of the New Way because only the Roman authorities had the legal authority to execute someone. Instead, he looked for ways to persecute the followers of Jesus—harassment, prison, physical punishment. For a while, it seemed to work. The name of Jesus was no longer spoken so openly in the Temple, and his followers scattered. Unwilling to see the New Way spread, Saul asked the elders for their unofficial approval to take his campaign against the New Way to nearby Damascus. He joined a caravan and set out on foot. After several days they drew close to Damascus. It was near noon, the sun’s hot glare slowing even Saul’s grim determination. He *knew* he was right in stopping the spread of the New Way, but for several nights Stephen’s cries had been echoing through his dreams.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a burst of brilliant light stunned Saul. Eyes dazzled, he lost his balance and fell to the

ground, peering up at the brilliance. A figure stood in the sky, at the center of the radiant light, but Saul couldn't make out any details. Then the figure drew closer, and Saul was able to distinguish the man's features. Dark, liquid eyes full of wise compassion penetrated deep inside him, past all his defenses. *Those eyes knew him, knew who he was, all he had done, all he longed to be.* It was a divine gaze, not of justice, but of love. Yet, a gaze tinged with sadness. Then, the light became so strong that Saul closed his eyes as the figure asked, "Saul . . . Saul . . . why are you persecuting me?"

Those words overwhelmed Saul. "Who . . . who are you, Lord?" he dared to ask.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

He lay there stunned, feeling the world spinning around him. Gamaliel had warned him, yet he hadn't listened and had gotten everything wrong! *Jesus* was the *true* Messiah, the very Son of God! And he—Saul—had opposed him! For a moment, despair wrestled with Saul's memory of glimpsing that powerful gaze of love. Then, suddenly, he knew the one offer he could make.

He raised himself to a sitting position. "Lord, what do you want me to do?" he asked, looking up at the figure in the brightness.

"Get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do," Jesus replied.

Then the sky darkened—so dark that Saul could see nothing at all. He stayed there, seated on the ground—stunned by the revelation he had received. He could hear the voices of the travelers near him, and finally, when one of them tried to lift him to his feet, Saul realized that the darkness of night had not fallen. He was blind! As he had been blind spiritually, now he was blind physically.

The soul-shattered Saul had to be led by the hand into the city of Damascus. His companions didn't understand what had happened. They hadn't seen Jesus, and they didn't know what to do with this broken man. They brought him to a place where he could lodge and left him there.

For three days, Saul struggled to understand his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. He couldn't eat or drink. His blindness was forcing him to think over what Jesus had revealed. The Law had been replaced by a Person—the Son of God. Saul's life as a persecutor was over. All that he had thought important was meaningless in the light of a God who had become man and had died to save all of humankind. Saul hadn't just made a mistake; his whole life was a mistake. Saul was a total failure.

Despair haunted Saul as the meaning of Jesus' words became clearer to him. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Every time he had harassed and imprisoned a follower of Jesus, he had chained and persecuted Jesus himself. Stephen's death—and his own part in it—would haunt him for the rest of his life. The only thing that gave Saul hope was his memory of glimpsing the face of the Lord Jesus. That penetrating, compassionate gaze would remain forever etched on the young Pharisee's heart.

On the third day, Saul's host interrupted his blind solitude to tell him that a man named Ananias was there to see him. Saul had had a dream about someone named Ananias the night before, but his ordeal had taken so much out of him that he was weak and trembling as he rose to greet his visitor.

Ananias laid his hands on Saul's head saying, "My brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you has sent me to help you recover your sight and receive the Holy Spirit."

Saul felt something like scales fall from his eyes. He blinked in the dim light of the room—the first light he had seen in three days. An older man stood before him, cautiously waiting. In his desperate need, Saul reached out and grasped Ananias' hand, stiff with reserve. "You are his follower! Will Jesus ever forgive me? What am I supposed to do now so that the Lord will not abandon me?"

Ananias relaxed his stiff shoulders. "Jesus himself sent me to you. I think he has already forgiven you. He has chosen you to bring his name to both Gentiles and Jews. You know," Ananias added as he looked closely at Saul's gaunt face. "I didn't want to come here. I thought you'd do me harm. But the Lord insisted. He said that your mission will not be easy, and that you will suffer for his name."

A great weight lifted from Saul's chest. "What should I do?" he asked. "How can I begin to follow his Way? I have heard that you baptize new followers with water. Can I be baptized?"

Ananias released Saul's trembling hand. "Let's talk first. You may have questions about Jesus. And I think you need a good meal."

"Then will you baptize me?" Saul asked intensely.

Ananias smiled. "Gladly, once I am sure that you know what it means. For us, Baptism is more than just a purifying ritual. Jesus himself made the waters of Baptism holy when John the Baptist baptized him in the Jordan. Baptism in Jesus doesn't just take away sin. It's a new birth. We're born into a new life, the life that Jesus gives us, life in his Spirit."

Saul suddenly didn't know which of his many questions to ask, and he found it hard to stay on his feet. Ananias guided him to a seat, and during a meal he began instructing Saul.

Saul regained his strength, was baptized, and immediately sought to proclaim his newfound faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. Yet, all did not go smoothly. At first, Saul seemed better at stirring things up than living in harmony. The intensity of Saul's character and his unwavering, sometimes challenging approach to preaching the Gospel became a source of tension in the first Christian communities he lived in. Even when he went to Jerusalem to hear about Jesus from the apostles themselves, he stirred up resentment by his powerful preaching. Finally, the Church in Jerusalem sent him back to his home city of Tarsus.

For several years, Saul remained in Tarsus, earning a living by tentmaking while interiorizing and deepening the foundations of his faith and his relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Then Saul's friend Barnabas visited him and invited him to help minister to the Church in Antioch. After several months, at an assembly of prayer, the Holy Spirit spoke powerfully to the leaders of the Christians at Antioch, sending Barnabas and Saul as "apostles" to the Gentiles. This was the beginning of Saul's special mission as an apostle—a mission that lasted for the rest of his life. During his journeys throughout the Roman Empire, Saul used his Roman name—Paul. That is the name by which he is best known today.

It is estimated that Paul traveled tens of thousands of miles on foot and by sea as an apostle of his crucified Lord. Both the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters list the many sacrifices and dangers he faced, including imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, and scourging as he sought to bring Christ's name everywhere. But Paul didn't care about his sufferings. His life had become so centered on Jesus that he would write, "For me, life is Christ." His biggest concern was for the churches that he had founded and

visited, and he offered his sufferings, his “crucifixion with Christ,” for their salvation and holiness. His warm affection for his communities and the intensity of his love for Christ nurtured the early Church. His letters express that warmth, his gratitude to his many close collaborators, and a “theology in action,” for Paul was an innovative thinker as well as a decisive action-taker.

Finally, Paul was arrested during one of the Roman Emperor Nero’s persecutions of the Christians. He was not afraid of death, knowing that nothing could separate him from Christ’s love. Instead, he was grateful that he could offer himself completely to the One who had died for him. Worn out with a lifetime of service to the Gospel, Paul bowed his head under the sword of the executioner, finally sharing completely in the death and immortal life of his beloved Master.

Personal Challenge

When was the last time I sat in front of the Blessed Sacrament and allowed Jesus to look at me the way he gazed at Saint Paul?

Prayer

Saint Paul, your heart was filled to overflowing with the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. You fully lived your Baptism into his death and Resurrection, testifying to the world about Jesus not just with words and letters, but with your very life and death. May the love of Christ overflow into my life so that I, too, may witness to the unfathomable love of Christ to all whom I meet. May the fullness of Christ and the power of his love and purpose come to fruition in me so that I can say with you, “For me to live is Christ.” Amen.

Notes on His Life

- ~::~~ *How do we know so much about Saint Paul?* In the New Testament, we have his letters and the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts give us a valuable framework of Paul's life, but Paul's letters reveal the great heart and passion of the apostle.
- ~::~~ *Did Saint Paul write all the New Testament letters attributed to him?* At the time the New Testament was being written, authorship was understood differently than it is today. In those days it was an accepted practice for writers to associate their works with famous persons to give more authority to their writing. Today's Scripture scholars do not agree about all the letters formerly attributed to Saint Paul. About half of these letters are accepted by all scholars as genuine (Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). Scholars who accept only those seven letters as written by Paul regard the other "Pauline" letters as written by his collaborators or other writers who summarized some of Paul's thoughts. Early Church tradition supports the Pauline authorship of all the letters. Scripture scholarship has its limits, and ongoing studies continue to reveal new information and insights. All thirteen letters are accepted as being "in the school" of Paul, and—most importantly—all are considered by the Church to be the inspired Word of God.
- ~::~~ *How can one best describe Saint Paul, whose influence over the Church has been so great that some people erroneously call him the "founder" of Christianity?* Jesus Christ is the Founder of Christianity, but he entrusted much of the first outreach of his Church to Saint Paul, who became the missionary par

excellence. Saint Paul was also a theologian, pastor, spiritual writer, and martyr. His letters sketch the earliest pictures we have of the Church and give us the language to describe spiritual and theological realities, such as Baptism and life in Christ. The best description of Paul himself comes from his own words: “apostle of Jesus Christ.”

In His Own Words

“God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”

Reader's Guide for Saint Paul, page 153.



Saint Cecilia

Singing God's Praises

BORN: second or third century

DIED: second or third century, martyr in Rome

FEAST DAY: November 22

PATRON: music

With tears in her eyes, Cecilia looked down at the white tunic she was about to put on. It was perfect, woven of the finest linen, a fitting wedding garment for a young noblewoman of a wealthy Roman family. The young teenager's parents had arranged her marriage to Valerian, a nobleman in his early twenties. The few times they had met, Cecilia had been impressed by her groom's uprightness, his love for his brother Tiburtius, and his thoughtfulness. Romance had no place in arranged marriages in third century Rome, but Cecilia knew that her parents thought this marriage was best for her. The problem was that Cecilia didn't want to marry at all, and certainly not to someone who didn't share her beliefs, however noble he was!

An ardent Christian, Cecilia had tried to explain to her parents that following Jesus was the most important thing in the world to her. Even though it was risky to be a Christian—martyrdom was always a possibility—Cecilia had been able to practice her faith secretly for years, under her father's protection. Her parents were not believers, but up until now, they had tolerated Cecilia's adherence to the Christian faith. What they didn't understand was that years ago, in her desire to give herself completely to God, Cecilia had made a vow of virginity. She had promised God that she would remain a virgin forever and dedicate her entire life to him, sharing with others her belief in Jesus and serving Christ in those who were poor and needy. But her parents had never understood her beliefs, and now they were adamant that she marry Valerian.

What could she do? She had tried to explain her situation to her parents, at first together, and then separately. After two or three conversations, her father had forbidden her to speak on the topic again. When she protested, he had simply turned and walked away. Cecilia had hoped her mother would understand, but she too had insisted that Cecilia marry, completely dismissing her concerns. Her mother had pointed out that the handsome young man had a reputation for being kind and fair. He was a pagan, but Cecilia's mother thought that he might eventually allow Cecilia to live according to her beliefs; he seemed to be a good man who would probably tolerate Cecilia's strange ideas and habits as her parents had. Valerian's paganism might even keep her safe from the persecutions of the Christians that frequently flared up around the empire, making it dangerous even to gather for the Eucharist.

The priest that Cecilia had consulted about her situation had been sympathetic but had advised submission and prudence. Cecilia, however, felt that she couldn't tiptoe around Valerian forever. Was it even fair to marry him without telling him that she was a Christian and had made a vow of virginity that she meant to keep? How could she persuade Valerian to respect her vow? At some point, she'd have to trust Valerian and tell him. So why not tonight? Perhaps he wouldn't care she if she was a Christian. Perhaps he would convert. Or perhaps he would renounce her as his wife and turn her over to the emperor! These were dangerous times for Christians. Cecilia knew she'd be risking her life, but wasn't her life always in God's hands?

Cecilia's heart pounded within her as the servant came in to fix her hair. Cecilia couldn't see a way out of the wedding. She hadn't slept well the past three nights, praying and seeking the right words to confide her secret to Valerian. Despite her fears, Cecilia knew in her heart that to God, nothing was impossible. She would trust her true Bridegroom to come to her rescue, however he would choose to do so.

The servant finished her hair and helped her to dress. It was time!

The wedding ceremony and banquet seemed to drag on forever. Throughout the celebration, every time her fear arose, Cecilia renewed her trust. "My Jesus, my true Bridegroom, help me to be faithful to you!" Then the wedding feast was over. In candlelight procession, Cecilia and Valerian walked from the house where she had grown up to her new home. With all the noise of the celebration, they couldn't talk. But on the way, Cecilia caught Valerian watching her keenly.

At last, they arrived at Valerian's home, and Cecilia and Valerian were alone together.

Valerian held out his hand to his beautiful young bride. He seemed to be trying to put her at ease. Cecilia reached out and hesitantly took his hand, but before he could draw her closer, she forestalled him, her words rushing out.

"Valerian, I have to tell you something: an important secret about me. I beg of you to respect it!"

Valerian tensed. "Cecilia, I want to get to know you as my wife, and I will always respect you. Tell me what's been on your mind all day."

"I am a Christian," she blurted out, "and I have made a vow of virginity. I'm already promised to God." She held her breath. *He had noticed that she had been uneasy all day. What would he do?*

Valerian was stunned and confused. "You are a Christian? What do you mean you are promised to God?"

Cecilia's eyes lit up. He was giving her a chance to explain! "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who came down from heaven to share our human life with us. He *died* to save us from sin and despair and suffering. I've been in love with him my whole life, and I promised him with a vow of virginity that I would dedicate my life to him completely. He is my real 'Bridegroom.'" She took a deep breath. "It's not that I don't respect you, Valerian. But I'm already promised."

Valerian hesitated. He seemed to be struggling to make sense of what she had said. He looked both hurt and confused. Then he spoke. "But how can you choose a God you cannot see, over a husband you can see?" he asked, trying to understand. "Are God's love and presence so real to you? More real than I am, standing here before you?" He took a step forward.

For a moment, Cecilia wanted to shrink back. Was he angry? She took a deep breath, then stepped closer to this man whose eyes were looking into hers for answers. She could see an undercurrent of something else in them—an emotion she couldn't quite identify.

"Yes, this Jesus is as real to me as you are. Just because I can't see him doesn't mean I don't sense his presence or see the way he works in my life. I hear the melody of his love every day, even though I cannot see his hands or the instrument he plays. He gives my life meaning, and he calls me to share in his work. He sends his angel to protect me. He walks beside me. I have nothing to fear from you because he is with me, right now."

As she spoke, Valerian's expression changed to wonder. "What is it like to be so sure of something that you would risk everything?" He took her by the hand and led her to a couch. "I am deeply moved. Tell me more," he urged. "Teach me about this God-Man whom you call Jesus Christ, and this angel who protects you."

Cecilia's face glowed with joy.

Over the next few months, Cecilia had the joy of sharing her faith not just with her new husband but with his brother Tiburtius as well. When the young men were baptized, Cecilia thought her heart would burst with happiness. Together, the three of them worked side by side to alleviate poverty and oppression in the city of Rome. The persecution of the Christians, spearheaded by Turcius Almachius, the Prefect of Rome, was growing fiercer by the day, and the trio found ways to secretly help the Christians who were suffering. They visited the imprisoned and buried the martyrs.

Cecilia's great joy was shaken when her husband and his brother were arrested as Christians. The prefect was especially

eager to discredit noblemen who were sympathetic to the Christians, and Valerian and Tiburtius had become too well known for burying the Christian martyrs to be ignored. After their arrest, the two brothers were given an opportunity to offer incense to one of the gods of Rome. When they refused, they were executed by the sword. Maximus, the Roman official assigned to witness their execution, was so moved by their courageous faith that he, too, was converted and martyred shortly after.

Cecilia tearfully received their remains, rescued by other Christians, and buried them. She knew that despite their sufferings, they had joyfully offered their lives to God. However, she keenly felt the pain of loneliness and separation. She worried that she was not worthy to lay down her life for Christ, too.

Her fears proved groundless. Shortly after, Cecilia was accused of being a Christian. Brought before the prefect, Cecilia fearlessly affirmed her Christian faith and refused to sacrifice to the Roman idols. Fearing the consequences of the public execution of a noblewoman, Turcius Almachius ordered that she be suffocated to death in the steam bath of her own home. Soldiers heated the bath and locked her inside. Hours later, long after she should have died, they heard music. Opening the door, they found her miraculously alive and singing a hymn of praise to God.

The soldiers reported back to the prefect about what had happened. He then ordered that Cecilia be slain by the sword in her home. The executioner struck her neck three times, but either through nervousness or incompetence, he did not kill her outright. Instead, Cecilia was left there to suffer intensely for three days. As friends and spectators gathered around her, Cecilia, who was unable to speak, wanted to witness to her faith in God. With

one hand, she held up one finger to express her faith in her one, beloved God. With the other hand, she raised three fingers to express her faith in the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in Three Persons. With this simple gesture, Cecilia renewed her baptismal faith until her soul went forth to receive the inheritance of that faith—the loving embrace of the Father, Son, and Spirit to whom she had witnessed with her entire life.

Personal Challenge

Like Saint Cecilia, could my joyful witness of the faith be the turning point for someone to come to Christ?

Prayer

Saint Cecilia, the melody of God's love surrounded you and strengthened you in all your trials. You fearlessly lived your Baptism and offered your life as a witness to the triune love of God—Father, Son, and Spirit. Help us to hear and join in singing the melody of God's love to our world. Amen.

Notes on Her Life

~~~~~ Saints Cecilia, Valerian, and Tiburtius really existed and died as Christian martyrs sometime in the second or third centuries, when Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. Unknown numbers of followers of Jesus—whether in the thousands or the millions is still debated today—died as martyrs for their faith in Jesus. The stories and even the names of most of these early heroic witnesses have been lost.

The catacombs and early martyrologies give us the names of some, like Cecilia, Valerian, and Tiburtius. The details about Cecilia's life are reported in a fifth century text whose historical reliability is debated, the "Acts of the Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia."

- ~::~~ By the fourth century, Saint Cecilia was being honored as a martyr; by the fifth century, she was one of the most venerated of the early martyrs. She is among the few saints whose name is included in the Canon of the Mass.
- ~::~~ Saint Cecilia has been associated with music because of two legends about her: while the musicians played at her wedding, Cecilia sang to God in her heart, and, as the soldiers were trying to suffocate her, Cecilia sang the praises of God.
- ~::~~ In the ninth century, Saint Cecilia appeared to Pope Paschal I, who was rebuilding Saint Cecilia's Church and searching for her remains to transfer them to the church. Saint Cecilia asked him to keep looking, telling him that he had gotten very close to her. Her remains were found and transferred, along with those of Valerian, Tiburtius, and Maximus.
- ~::~~ Saint Cecilia was probably a wealthy woman because the Church of Saint Cecilia, built in the fourth century and dedicated to her in the fifth century, is thought to have been built on property Cecilia herself had donated to the Church. Excavations underneath the twice-restored church have uncovered Cecilia's third-century home, which can be toured today, including the bath where Cecilia was martyred.

## In Her Own Words

“I am called Cecilia, but my most beautiful name is Christian.”

*Reader's Guide for Saint Cecilia, page 155.*