

New Brighton, Sunday 11th August 2024

St Philomena

12th Sunday after Pentecost

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

We are very blessed, in this Shrine Church of Ss Peter and Paul and St Philomena, to possess the red vestment we are using today for this feast of St Philomena, Co-Patron of our Shrine, the little wonderworker. These vestments were made in her honour by a Spanish seaman as a thanksgiving, because our saint miraculously preserved him and his fleet from a storm while he was at sea.

The embroideries we can see upon the vestments are the same that we discovered, engraved on her tomb, in the Catacombs of St Priscilla, in 1802. They are the attributes of her martyrdom, as she refused to betray the promise she made to God.

The first is an anchor, to which she was attached and thrown into the Tiber. But the angels saved her and brought her safely to the riverbank. The anchor is the symbol for her fortitude and her hope.

We can also see an arrow, which twice afflicted her. The first time, she was left to die, pierced with several of them. She was miraculously healed during the night she spent in prison. The second time, the arrows refused to pierce her, and turned against her executioners. This other miracle made several of them embracing the Faith, and become martyrs themselves, being added to the numerous saints in heaven.

A sword is crossed with the arrow, remembering us about the last torment she was given to endure before being granted the eternal reward: she was beheaded.

Finally, surrounding all these instruments, and crown made of two plants: the palm and the lily. The palm is the traditional reward of the martyrs. They were used to proclaim the kingship of Christ, as He triumphally entered in Jerusalem, just before His Passion. The lily is the pure flower of her innocence and virginity.

The story of her life explains also about her name. She was at first called Lumina, which means light, as a reference of the light of the faith, which never died in her soul, but was strengthened and made perfect through her martyrdom. At her baptism, this name was changed for Phi-lumina, daughter of the light, because she was made daughter of God, the source of all grace and light.

Several miracles testify about her since we discovered her relics at the beginning of the 19th century. St John-Mary Vianney, as many other holy clerics and saints, highly contributed to the diffusion of her veneration, and she still watches over us today. No doubt she is amongst us through her mysterious and holy presence, guiding our faith, strengthening our hope, making us live from the same fire of charity, which animated her during her great sufferings and martyrdom.

The attributes of her martyrdom that we briefly contemplated upon the vestments open the way to heaven for us. She walked before us, and she still stand, holding a beautiful and shiny light, for us to clearly see. Her virtues, her fortitude, her firm confidence and constancy are like the lighthouse guiding the seaman toward the harbour, a safe place were to rest.

As she miraculously protected the seamen who offered the vestment, she desires to protect us, and she will present on our behalf our request to the Lord God. St Philomena is the virgin of the Gospel who kept her the light on her lamp. It is still burning in honour of Christ, and her example is the invitation of the Lord to not look like to the five foolish virgins, who were caught by surprise. The oil she had in her lamp burns forever in heaven and leads our steps towards her.

Our struggles, doubts and difficulties are part of the same duty. Sometimes, they could even look like a spiritual martyrdom. But St Philomena watches over us. Her lamp is there, above our head, guiding our faith towards the greater light, God. She endured all her sufferings and the hate of others, so that her great holiness and courage would become the guidance we often need, as we are losing ourselves in the darkness of this world. Her torments and the several miraculous healing are the consolation for us, that God will always be on our side, if we are walking through tribulations, evil traps and difficulties.

She made a definite choice, when she dedicated herself to God, and she remained faithful to Him. Christ became her light, and her name received all its meaning. God provided us a wonder to contemplate, an example to follow, and life and dedication to imitate. Let's confide in her power! May her faith and strength become ours!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.