

Dolorosa

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

OCTOBER 2018

THE PERFECT EFFORT



October has again quickly come and gone. It is considered by many to be the most exquisite month of the year. Among the reasons for this is its beauty. When one thinks of October, he typically associates it with the orange, yellow, red, and brown leaves of autumn; with the crisp fall air; with the scent of burning leaves and firewood.

Another reason that makes October so beautiful is that it is dedicated to our Mother and Queen. October is the month of the most holy Rosary, and during October we celebrate two major feasts of Our Lady. On October 7th, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Rosary; on October 11th, the Feast of the Divine Maternity. There is, however, another feast of Our Lady, celebrated on October 12th, that is not on the Church's universal calendar. This feast commemorates the first known apparition of the Blessed Virgin. It is the Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar.

About twenty years before Our Divine Savior's birth, the Roman Emperor Augustus established a Roman outpost in northern Spain on the Ebro River.

We know it today as the fifth largest city in Spain—Zaragoza, also known as Saragossa.

According to a venerable tradition, sometime after Our Lord ascended into heaven, the Apostle Saint James the Greater, who was the brother of Saint John the Evangelist, went to this Roman outpost to preach the Gospel. Before leaving Jerusalem, he went to the Blessed Virgin and asked her blessing upon his undertaking. She blessed him and promised him her prayers and ceaseless intercession with her divine Son. Saint James then departed for Spain.



Several years passed with much prayer, sacrifice, and labor for souls. Yet, in that space of time, only a relative handful of people had converted and been baptized. According to the tradition, Saint James became somewhat discouraged that so few had responded to the Gospel. He thus planned to leave Zaragoza and return to Jerusalem. While he was praying about it with a few of his disciples by the Ebro River, Our Lady, who was still living at the time in Jerusalem, appeared to him and



his disciples. She stood atop a pillar of jasper stone which was carried by angels. In her hands she held a small wooden statue of herself holding the Christ Child. Our Lady encouraged Saint James to persevere. She promised him that the people to whom he preached would not only convert, but that they would one day have faith as strong as the pillar on which she stood.

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The Blessed Virgin then gave the statue and the pillar to Saint James and requested that he build a church there in her honor. In *Historic Shrines of Spain*, Isabel Allardyce tells us that Our Lady addressed Saint James in these words:

My son, James, the Most High and Mighty God of Heaven has chosen this place that you may consecrate and dedicate here a temple and house of prayer where, under the invocation of my name, He wishes to be adored and served, and all the faithful who seek my intercession will receive the graces they ask if they have true faith and devotion. (8)

Our Lady then made this promise to Saint James:

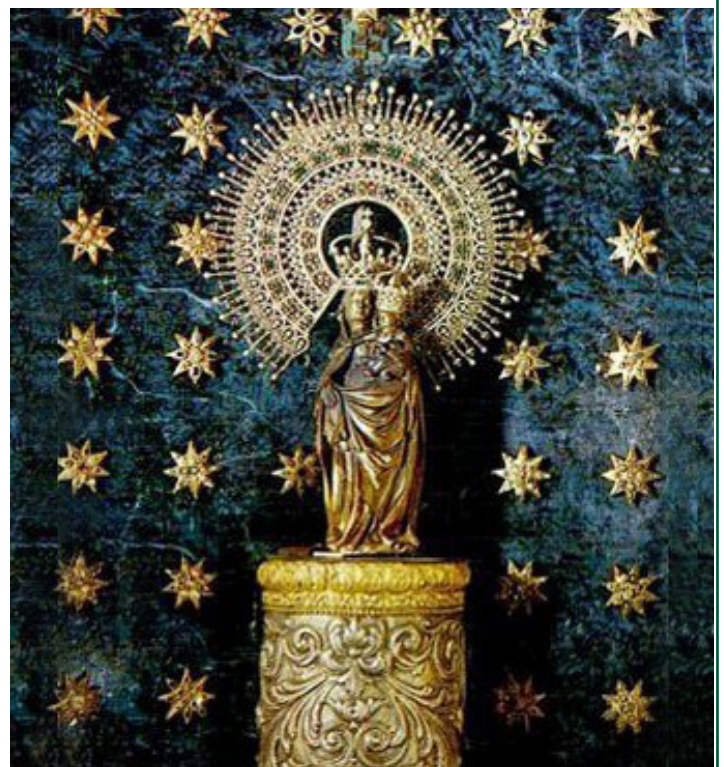
In the name of my Son, I promise them great favors and blessings, for this will be my temple and my house, my own inheritance and possession. In testimony of my promise, this pillar will remain here, and on it my own image. . . . it will last and endure with the holy Faith until the end of the world in order that God may work miracles and wonders through my intercession for all those who place themselves under my patronage. (8-9)

After this the Blessed Mother reiterated her request that a church be built in her honor. She said to Saint James:

This you must do at once, and when your work is accomplished, you will pass over to Jerusalem, where it is the will of my Divine Son that you make the sacrifice of your life where He gave His for the redemption of mankind. (9)

After giving Saint James some final words of encouragement, Our Lady then vanished with the host of angels that accompanied her. The pillar and statue alone remained.

Fulfilling Our Lady's wish, Saint James and his disciples constructed a small chapel over the place where she had appeared at Zaragoza. An altar was built beside the pillar and upon the pillar was placed the wooden statue of the Mother and Child. The shrine became known as Our Lady of the Pillar or *Nuestra Senora del Pilar*.





Over the centuries, the chapel was renovated and rebuilt a number of times. Today, the pillar and statue are preserved in the illustrious basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar in Zaragoza. There, they can be seen and venerated by Catholic faithful from all over the world.

Interestingly, in 1936 three bombs were dropped on the basilica by the communists during the Spanish Civil War. It was an attempt to destroy not only the basilica but also the venerable statue and pillar. The attempt failed. One bomb fell to the side of the basilica; the other two broke through the roof and hit the floor. None of the bombs, however, exploded. The two bombs that fell through the roof can be seen on display in the basilica today. This miraculous occurrence is no doubt a testimony to Our Lady's promise: "[the pillar] will last and endure with the holy Faith until the end of the world in order that God may work miracles and wonders through my intercession for all those who place themselves under my patronage."

The devotion to Our Lady of the Pillar is not well known throughout the world. Nonetheless, it is the most ancient devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, having been started while she was yet living. It is also the greatest devotion to her in Spain. Our Lady of the Pillar is to Catholic Spain what Our Lady of Guadalupe is to Catholic Mexico. As Our Lady of Guadalupe is the love and strength of Mexican Catholics, Our Lady of the Pillar is the love and strength of Spanish Catholics just as she was the love and strength of Saint James, the Patron of Spain.

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Our Lady appeared to Saint James at a rather discouraging time in his life. She showed herself as a true pillar of strength to him. She thus encouraged him, and she aided him in the practice of the cardinal virtue of fortitude.

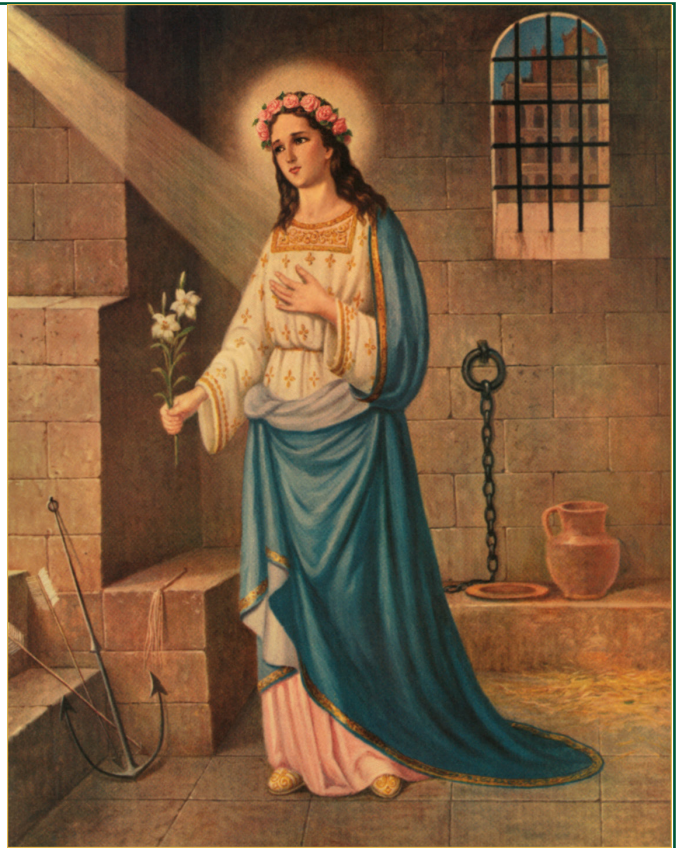
Fortitude, which is also known as courage, is the virtue that disposes us to do what is good in spite of difficulty. In other words, it is the virtue that gives us the strength to do good and avoid evil when we are faced obstacles and afflictions. Fortitude, moreover, helps us to undertake difficult actions and to endure with patience the trying situations of life. Thus, the more a soul loves God, the more courageous he will be in undertaking any work—no matter how difficult—for love of Him.

We are all capable of practicing fortitude. Some people have the misconception that fortitude consists in superior physical strength or in what they call "nerves of steel"—meaning that one does not feel nervous or fearful in the face of difficult or dangerous situations. Fortitude does not necessarily mean this.

On the contrary, some of the most courageous people in the history of the world were not physically strong. They were young women who were considered weak in the eyes of the world: the virgin-martyrs who lived in times of persecution and who laid down their lives for the sake of Christ. One example of such fortitude is Saint Philomena. She was only thirteen years old when she was arrested during the persecution of Diocletian. Having refused to compromise her Faith and her purity, this young girl was scourged, drowned with an anchor, and even pierced by arrows. However, each time she was attacked, an angel miraculously delivered her from death until finally the Emperor ordered her to be beheaded.

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Saint Agnes is another example. She, like Saint Philomena, was about 13 years old or so. The Roman governor pressured her in every way and resorted to the basest of threats to move her to deny her Faith, but she steadfastly refused. Saint Agnes was even sentenced to



be burned alive, but the flames miraculously did not harm her. In the end, she, too, was beheaded.

Saint Philomena and Saint Agnes are but two of the countless examples of Catholic fortitude. So many young virgin-martyrs heroically gave their lives for the Faith that the Church could certainly compose a litany in their honor if she so desired. These young women were looked upon as weaklings in the eyes of the world, but they were truly among the most courageous people who ever lived. Indeed, such heroism is uncommon in the strongest and bravest of men.

While it is true that Saint Philomena, Saint Agnes, and martyrs like them lived a long time ago, they are nonetheless models for our day and age. This is because they possessed and practiced to an extraordinary degree a virtue that our time lacks.

We all need fortitude—great and, at times, heroic fortitude—because we live in an age of conformity and compromise. It is sad, but all too true, that many people today are willing to compromise their beliefs and their morals to conform to the standards of the world—to “fit in” with the world. This is something that we must never yield to. We must, therefore, cultivate this important virtue.

Fortitude helps us to confront anything, even death itself, in order to be faithful to God. The supreme act of fortitude, then, is martyrdom. While all are not called upon to suffer and shed their blood for Christ and His Church, still, everyone who is a true disciple of Christ is a potential martyr. Even





—Interior of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar

if we are not called upon to give Christ this supreme testimony of our love, we must nevertheless live our lives as courageous soldiers of Christ.

We do this by fearlessly professing and practicing our Faith in this faithless world—even in the face of the most difficult trials and under the most oppressive circumstances. We must also diligently strive to carry out the duties of our state in life no matter what hardships or obstacles arise. Furthermore, we must bravely persevere in carrying our crosses, that is, our sufferings, our sorrows, and our burdens. Fortitude will help us to do so.

It is thus so necessary. Indeed, fortitude is a virtue that cannot be underestimated. Just living a Catholic life in today's sinful world takes courage. To remain faithful to the true Mass and Sacraments, and to profess the one true Faith in spite of the inconvenience and in spite of the mockery and derisive remarks we may receive from others takes courage. It takes courage to say “no” to the world's impure movies, music, books, and magazines. It also takes a great deal of courage to speak the truth when we must uphold the teaching of the Church, especially with regard to the moral issues of today.

Perhaps more than ever before, how courageous one must be to be a good Catholic husband and father or a good Catholic wife and mother. How much fortitude it takes to ensure that one's children attend Mass and receive the sacraments; to defend and shelter one's children, as much as is reasonably possible, from the evil influences of the world, including bad companions.

What great fortitude must we practice to refuse participating in the impure conversations of the world and not to laugh at its impure jokes. Even praying grace before meals in public takes fortitude. How courageous must we be in this day and age to love God, to remain faithful to Him in time of temptation, and ultimately to save our souls!

We must thus have the same courageous spirit that inflamed Saint Philomena, Saint Agnes, and the martyrs. By God's grace, Our Lady's assistance, and this remarkable virtue, these valiant soldiers of Christ did not shrink from standing up for Almighty God and the one, true Faith. Each one of us is called by God to be another Saint Philomena, another Saint Agnes, another soldier of Christ. We are all called to be courageous saints—saints who, like the martyrs, will not compromise and conform and who will not run from sufferings and trials, but who burn with the same courage that blazed in the souls of these heroic saints. Each of us can therefore say with Our Divine Savior: “For this was I born, and for this came I into the world. . . (John 18:37).” We were born for heaven, and we came into the world to work out our salvation and be the courageous saints Our Lord has destined us to be.

There will, of course, be times when we will be tempted to discouragement as was Saint James. At times, it will be despondency at the state of the world; at other times, it will be on account of our failures; and at still other times, it will be because of adverse situations or moments of sorrow. There may be days when it seems that all our efforts are meaningless. At such times, we must go to Our Lady—our Pillar of Fortitude. As she promised Saint James, so does she promise us: “God [will] work miracles and wonders through my intercession for all those who place themselves under my patronage.” We need only turn to her.

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As we strive daily to give a perfect effort in the practice of fortitude, let us ever place ourselves under Our Lady's protection. She is our life, our sweetness, and our hope, but she is also our support. As the pillar supports the edifice, Our Lady supports us. It is thus no mere coincidence that she appeared to Saint James standing upon a pillar. She, no doubt, sought to impress upon us the fact that she is our Pillar. May we, then, go to our Pillar of Fortitude and take hold of her hand by recommending ourselves to her each day, bearing in mind these words of Saint Anselm: “All who dwell beneath the protection of Mary will be saved.”