The phenomenal scale of the widespread devotion, born of popular piety and nurtured by French nineteenth century Ultramontane ideology, to an Early Christian martyr named Philomena is incontrovertible. The historical foundation for this devotion, the vita sancta of a young Greek Christian who had refused the advances of the Emperor Diocletian in Rome and was, as a result, martyred in “the most severe and tragic manner” on his orders, is debatable. Nonetheless, irrespective of fact or fiction or perhaps because of their indeterminacy, the cult of Philomena, a name often remarked on as meaning Bringer of Light, provides a model, similar to those at Lourdes and La Salette in the same period, of the way that unquestioning faith, when supported by a political agenda, could inspire an entire nation in the post-Enlightenment period. Wrote her devoted biographer, Jean Darche, early in this century, “Le monde est aveugle, est ignorant parce qu’il est orgueilleux, sensuel, avare et indifférent, et Philomène lui donne l’exemple de la plus profonde humilité, de la plus parfaite mortification, du plus entier détachement, du plus grand zèle pour la gloire de Dieu.”

In the strictest sense of the standard vita sancta, what was singular about Philomena? To begin with, while she was similar to Bernadette of Lourdes or Thérèse of Lisieux in being young, female, innocent, and unworldly – in every respect a pure vessel for the transmission of heavenly grace – the latter two were known to be persons of flesh and blood located in time and space, whereas the ‘person’ Philomena was simply a construction: a generic Early Christian Virgin Martyr, formulated from the dreams of a pious nineteenth century Sicilian tertiary, Suor Maria Luisa di Gesù. This holy woman had been impelled by facts, fragments and symbols (IUMENA PAXTE CUM FI, two anchors, three arrows, a lily, a palm) (fig. 1) on a third century Christian titulus inscribed on three tiles discovered in 1802 in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla in Rome covering the grave of an adolescent girl, but she was expansive in her interpretation of them.

Seen from another angle, Philomena was again an anomaly. For unlike other patron saints, miracle workers, or objects of adoration from earlier eras who either do or do not have an authentic historical existence (for example the sixteenth century Spanish nuns Soeur Marie de Jésus d'Agreda and St. Theresa of Avila or Mary Egyptica and Mary Magdalene from the apostolic age) Philomena appears as the author of no moralizing or inspirational text, nor is any devotional text by someone of that name known, nor does any single pious act or thought have the name Philomena connected to it in any historical or liturgical literature. Moreover, her constructed vita sancta does not link her to the assuagement of any particular illness, any particular human need, or any particular passage in human life. Philomena was, in truth, entirely a fiction, in whom many thousands for many different reasons learned to put their faith, despite the historical/mythological/legendary vacuum surrounding her, which would continue to give pause to the more learned and rigorous in the Catholic hierarchy in Rome late into this century. Over their worthy and learned heads and despite their cautionary words, the devotion to Philomena in nineteenth century France soared ever upward on the strong wings of its seemingly magical and wide spread efficacy.

Where did Philomena's cult find its staying power? As the shepherds of straying post-Enlightenment sheep in Catholic Europe, many nineteenth century village curés shared and encouraged the natural, non-bookish, and non-historically lofty piety of the small numbers of the faithful among their parishioners. Many of the curés themselves were searching for their own way through their increasingly secular age (see Launay). Particular village curés were, therefore, of enormous importance in the spread of the devotion to Philomena. For while shrines and altars were dedicated to her in large urban churches in both Italy and France (Venice, Bologna, and Pisa; Paris and Lyon), the two major shrines from which all the others drew their strength were in poor villages, in Mugnano in the diocese of Nola near Naples and in Ars in the department of Ain, northeast of Lyon. In each,