

*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

## Annals from the Archives

# Julie Billiard Beatification 1906



Procession in Namur  
to celebrate the Beatification  
of Julie Billiard  
May 13, 1906

**May 2019**  
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—Though it took ninety years for Julie Billiard to be beatified, the efforts to have her proclaimed a saint began soon after her death on April 8, 1816. After her funeral was held April 10th at St. Joseph's Church in Namur, she was buried in the city's common cemetery. In the months following Julie's death, Mother St. Joseph, her successor, had a hidden vault built at the bottom of the convent's garden and an oratory dedicated to Mary constructed over it to hide the vault. The reason for the secrecy? Though the French Revolution was more than twenty years past, many in the area still held fervent anti-Catholic views. Because of that, Mother St. Joseph and the sisters feared the common cemetery might be moved and that Julie's body could be lost or desecrated. In addition, the sisters—being semi-cloistered—would not be able to visit her grave. In July of that year, though, Monsignor Pisani, the bishop of Namur, donated to the sisters a stone slab that would act as a tombstone for Julie's grave. As it was installed, they made sure that the slab was only lightly secured into the ground. The sisters had a plan, one that would take some time to complete.

The following year, on July 17, 1817, the sisters waited until after sunset before making their way to the cemetery with hired gravediggers to uncover Julie's grave. Once the men had removed the tombstone and opened the grave, the sisters told them to leave. After their departure, the sisters lifted Julie's body from the ground with the linens they had brought with them. Slowly, they made their way back to the convent and buried her in the secret garden crypt. For the next few decades, only the sisters knew where her body lay.

About the same time, Mother St. Joseph began writing a biography of Julie's life. She finished it in 1820. Dozens others also began writing down their memories of Julie, hoping for the day that she would be named a saint. Though decades passed without her case being brought to the Vatican, many still longed for Julie to be canonized. Finally, in 1881, Mother Aloysie began the official effort to have Julie canonized. But for that to happen, the Vatican required a cure or miracle that resulted from Julie's intervention. Many in the area reported on miracles they believed resulted from Julie's intercession. One came from Armand Hubin, whose ulcerous leg was cured when his mother prayed at Julie's tomb. Another was that of Noel Gregoire, whose leg was healed when he placed a relic from Julie upon his injury. The final miracle recognized by the Vatican was that of Louis Waelens, who'd suffered with an ulcer. He'd been unable to eat for years because of the pain and had been wasting

away. In 1886, his wife went to the sisters to tell them of her husband's suffering. They gave her a relic from Julie and suggested they pray a novena in Julie's honor. That night he was able to eat without pain for the first time in years.

In 1889, Pope Leo XIII had a papal decree announced to begin the process for her beatification, the first step toward canonization. And finally, the day for Julie's beatification was named. The Mass was held in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on Sunday May 13th, 1906. Attending the ceremony in Rome was Sr. Agnes Aloysia DeGourcy (1841-1918). She left Namur on May 3rd with Sisters Mary Bernardine and Therese as well as several others, taking the train through Ardennes in southeast Belgium and into Luxembourg. They passed through Metz, Strasbourg, and Basel, Switzerland, where she wrote of seeing, *"the Alps which seem ever nearer."* After a stop overnight in Lucerne, they boarded their next train for the journey through the Alps. While Sisters Mary Bernardine and Therese slept, Sister Agnes wandered the car to peer through the windows at the *"surpassingly beautiful scenes we were going through. It was, of course, dark, but there was a high riding virgin moon nearly gibbous and the stars were out. . ."*

In Chiasso, Switzerland, they changed trains again and while it wasn't as comfortable as their previous train, Sr. Agnes wrote, *"But Oh! the country! The train wound in and out amongst the Apennines, going through about thirty-two tunnels, one could almost have plucked the gentians and ferns from our carriage window."* On May 5th, they arrived in Rome. As they neared St. Peter's Basilica, *"The very first thing that caught our eye was a large empty, gilt frame over the central bronze doorway. . .it bore on a blue ground the Latin inscription: The Blessed Julie Billiard. . ."*

During the week before the Beatification, they visited many of the churches, as well as the catacombs. While in Rome, however, the operators of the trams and carriages went on strike, soon followed by the local bakers, *"so that our fresh morning rolls were exchanged for a somewhat harder loaf made by the soldiers—an arrangement which prevails whenever the bakers are on a strike. We did not mind the bakery business, but the absence of carriages or tramcars was a serious delay in our pilgrimages. The traffickless streets were a curious spectacle and it was intensely hot."* The strike lasted until May 12th, the day before the Beatification.

On Sunday, May 13th, the sisters arrived at St. Peter's Basilica at 9 a.m. where *"an official glanced at our tickets, called out, 'A Sinistro,' and we went in. . .the front places were reserved for us. . .the whole space between the 'Confession' and the altar of the Chair of St. Peter was draped with red and gold. . .at 9:30 the brilliant procession entered. . ."* Sr. Agnes continued her description of the Mass and the arrival of the Pope for many more pages, overwhelmed by her joy at the moment.

Sister Agnes and her companions departed for home the next day, though not before taking a few hours to visit the artist responsible for the new commissioned paintings of Blessed Julie.



Procession to celebrate Blessed Julie's Beatification on May 13, 1906 in Namur

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ [The Life of the Blessed Julie Billiard](#), Edited by Father James Clare, S.J., 1909.
- ◆ *To Rome for the Beatification, Travel Journal of Sr. Agnes Aloysia DeGourcy*, May 1909.