

**A Candle to Light the Dark:
Brother Columba's Miraculous Healing of Sarah Ann Rath**

Presented at
The 2024 Holy Cross History Conference
Holy Cross College by
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June 15, 2024

The years following World War 1 brought about many changes in the United States, such as the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, which brought in the era of prohibition; the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, and the United States saw growth in its international relations and power. South Bend also saw growth in the time following the war as Studebaker switched from making carriages to exclusively manufacturing automobiles in South Bend, as well as the first opening of the Potawatomi Zoo. For the University of Notre Dame, this period following the Great War was filled with growth with the addition of the College of Commerce and other new areas for the increasing student body to study, and Knute Rockne who was propelling both the football team and the whole University into national notoriety. As all of these great developments were going on around the country, a constant was the ministry and prayer of Brother Columba O'Neill, who was coming to the end of his life, first diagnosed with the Spanish Flu in 1919. It was in 1921, however, just two years before his death, that Bro. Columba came to know Sarah Rath and healed her.

Sarah Ann Taylor, born on March 23, 1869, in Cleveland, Ohio, married Thomas Rath on September 9, 1890, in Cleveland and moved to Lorain, Ohio, where he had been living since 1883. In Lorain, they started their family by welcoming baby Raymond George into the world on July 21, 1891, and they would go on to have a total of six children, including Charlotte, Marion, Thomas Jr., and two other children. In 1921, around the age of 52, Sarah Rath became gravely ill. Before 1921, her husband, Thomas Rath, had inaugurated national advertising for the *American Stove Company*, directed experimentation and development on the stoves, and helped introduce new salesmen to the area, averaging over 25,000 miles a year on the road for multiple years. By 1921, however, around the age of 54, he was working as a manager and national advertiser for *American Stove Company*, requiring less time away from home and allowing him

to help care for Mrs. Rath in her illness. At the start of her ailment, Mrs. Rath heard about other people asking Brother Columba for prayers and so, following their example, she wrote to him for prayers on June 2, 1921.

Dr. Edward V. Hug, M.D. worked in Lorain and described in a 1933 letter to Sarah Rath his perspective of the events in 1921. He first notes that his records were destroyed in 1928 when his office burned down, but that he could “reconstruct the history of the case” through some memoranda he still had from the time. In his description, he recalls that he was first called to see Mrs. Rath in May 1921, although they had known each other for many years before. He says that Mrs. Rath was the mother of six children, four of which were still alive, and that her medical history had been rather bland and uneventful to that point. With this background in mind, he describes her condition upon his first visit, writing,

I found her in the midst of a severe chill, a rigor in fact, with a temperature of 105F., pulse 120, and respiration labored on account of severe pain in the right lower chest near the spine which restricted the inspiratory efforts. The pain radiated to the vesical region and was so intense as to cause profuse sweating. ¹

From her condition, he thought she was suffering from Renal calculus (put simpler name). Upon further testing, however, this theory was proven false and replaced with the diagnosis of cystitis and pyelonephritis, which are urinary tract infections of the bladder and kidneys. With this new diagnosis, Dr. Hug tried different treatments, but she did not respond to these. In fact, her condition grew worse, suffering from daily chills and fevers of 104-105 degrees, and she continued to grow weaker.

Because of her continued decline, Dr. Hug called in a “nationally known clinician”² for consultation and aid, but he offered no hope for recovery without the removal of Mrs. Rath’s

¹ Letter from Hug to Rath, Feb. 15, 1933

² Letter from Dr. Hug to Mrs. Rath, 1933

kidney. An operation that was risky and provided no guarantee of helping her condition. At this news, many around Sarah Rath lost hope, including relatives and those attending to her illness. In these many days of continued darkness, however, Mrs. Rath turned to the help of our good Brother Columba.

In her first letter to Brother Columba, dated June 2, 1921, Sarah Rath asks Brother Columba to “please ask our Lord and his Blessed Mother for the recovery of my health if it is God’s Holy will that I may be spared to my family.”³ With this plea for prayers, she also encloses a five-dollar donation (which is now, in 2024, nearly \$90) to Brother Columba in gratitude for his prayers, for which she asks him “to keep a red light burning on the Blessed Mother’s altar”⁴ for her intentions. Beyond this request, she also reveals some of her own devotion to the Sacred Heart by writing, “[F]or a few years I have kept a red light burning before a statue of the Sacred Heart in my own home and it is such a comfort to us I thought I would like to have it there. [M]y only regret is I am sorry I did not start this beautiful practice years ago.”⁵ Through the dark days of her affliction and disease, it can be assumed from her words that her faith and devotion to keeping a candle lit for the Sacred Heart, that the light had helped prepare her spiritually for battling her disease.

In the six letters that follow, dating from June 15 to July 31, 1921, Mrs. Rath writes much about her condition, the Sacred Heart Shrine that Brother Columba was working on, and her personal prayers. The second later, written on June 15, 1921, indicates that she had partially recovered from her affliction after remaining faithful to the novena that Brother had asked her to

³ June 2, 1921, letter from Mrs. Rath to Bro. Columba [there are many grammatical and spelling errors in Mrs. Rath's letters. They will not be indicated individually.]

⁴ June 2 letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba [Columba received many requests for votive candles to be kept burning for people’s intentions, even keeping one burning before the Sacred Heart Statue in his shoe shop.]

⁵ June 2 letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba

pray, as well as the Novena to Saint Joseph she had prayed on her own. She also shares her devotion to Saints Benedict and Therese of Lisieux, whose novenas she would soon start, and she encloses another donation in the letter, this time in thanksgiving for her partial recovery and to be used for Columba's Sacred Heart Shrine.

Just five days later, Mrs. Rath writes two more letters, responding to one she received that same day from Brother Columba, with a more specific request for her donations to be used in buying something for the Sacred Heart Shrine. In the first of these two letters, she also reflects on her love for the Sacred Heart and gratitude to Brother Columba, saying,

I feel so at home going to the Sacred Heart for help[.] Brother could not have asked me to make a novena that I would love more than the Novena to the Sacred Heart[,] and yet I never thought of making a novena to him[,] but I have no words to tell Brother what pleasure I found in turning to the dear Sacred Heart but feel I owe everything to Brother[']s Prayers.⁶

Following these great words of appreciation for Brother Columba and great love for the Sacred Heart, she expresses her dear desire to visit the Shrine upon its completion.

The fifth letter from Mrs. Rath, dated June 24, comes as a response to a letter from Brother Columba describing the Shrine. She notes that she totally trusts the Sacred Heart in her continued healing as she continues the practice of keeping a candle lit by her Sacred Heart statue at home. She is still not totally well at this point, remaining under the doctor's care, and is unable to attend Mass. Her prayers, she writes, are oriented toward being well enough to attend Mass, which she hopes will be soon after the time of her writing, as well as her prayers for Brother Columba, who continues to decline because of Spanish Influenza. Toward the end of this letter, she writes, "I hope you will be shared among us for a long time, but I am sure you will not forget

⁶ June 20, 1921, first letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba written that date.

us poor weak mortals when our Dear Lord takes you to himself.”⁷ She truly believed in not only the efficacy of Columba’s prayers but that he was a living Saint.

Five days later, Mrs. Rath writes a sixth letter to Brother Columba, where she points out that she is on the eighth day of her Novena to the Sacred Heart. That very morning, she says that her pastor allowed her to go to the Church for Confession and to receive Holy Communion. This letter is rather short, but again, she makes sure to ask for a light to remain burning in the Shrine for her intention with an enclosed five-dollar donation for the candles. Again, as in her previous letters, she is hopeful about visiting the Shrine as soon as she is healed and able to travel.

A month goes by without any letter from Sarah Rath to Brother Columba, and the next letter, written on July 31, is the shortest letter so far. In this brief note, she says she is “getting along nicely but still not well yet”⁸ and asks again for a lamp to be kept burning for her intentions. From the brevity of this letter and the extended period between the sixth and seventh letters, I find it quite possible that Sarah Rath took a turn for the worse in this time, even as she says she is “getting along nicely.” There is no other indication of her current state, however, when she wrote this to Columba in July of 1921.

Dated September 10, 1921, Rath’s eighth letter to Brother Columba finally brings news of their prayers being answered, and she states, “I have just returned from the Doctors and hasten to write you. [H]e says he does not find any trouble with me now wich caused my sickness and I can never tell you how much I thank you fir all you have done for me”.⁹ Mrs. Rath would go on in this letter to reemphasize her desire to see the Shrine upon its completion, but more importantly, she references a visit from Brother Columba, writing, “we were all very happy to

⁷ June 24, 1921, letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba.

⁸ July 31, 1921, letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba.

⁹ September 10, 1921, letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba.

have Brother visit us, and it only made one realize all the more your great interest in our suffering humanity.”¹⁰ This note indicates that Brother Columba made a visit, either specifically to see Mrs. Rath or to the Cleveland area in general between the seventh letter, written at the end of August, and the eighth letter, written on September 10. An interesting parallel with this letter is that in many cases of healings brought about by Columba’s intercessory prayers, the eighth day of the Novena was the day of healing, and in Mrs. Rath’s case, it is her eighth letter to Brother Columba, which brings news of her being healed.

In Dr. Hug’s letter from 1933, he acknowledges the efficacy of Bro. Columba’s prayer and care when he says,

Brother Columba became interested in her case and added his prayers to those of her family and friends. She began to improve and for the past twelve years has been in good health and... has shown no evidence of the disease which threatened her life.¹¹

These words from Dr. Hug tell us that after the eighth letter is written, and she is no longer afflicted, she remains in good health for at least twelve years with no sign of the disease coming back or having lingering effects. It is a total healing, attributed by both Mrs. Rath and Dr. Hug to the prayer of Brother Columba to the Sacred Heart.

In the final months of 1921, following Mrs. Rath’s news of her restored health, she writes two more letters to Brother Columba. One in her October 2 letter and the other on December 12. Her letter to Brother Columba on October 2 comes in response to a letter from Brother Columba, received by Mrs. Rath on October 1, that carried news of the Sacred Heart Shrine’s completion. Upon hearing this good news, Mrs. Rath immediately plans her visit to see the Shrine as soon as Mr. Rath is able to take a few days off of work, and she says that she is going, even if she has to

¹⁰ September 10, letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba.

¹¹ 1933 Letter from Dr. Hug to Mr. Rath.

walk the whole way, which is about 225 miles! She concludes her letter with prayers for Brother Columba's health and continued work of humble prayer.

Mrs. Rath is able to make her visit to Notre Dame to see Brother Columba and the Sacred Heart Shrine at some point in October or November of 1921. On her visit, she also met Brother Lambert [Barbier, C.S.C.], who was in temporary vows at that time and would go on to serve as General Steward for the community, and who died in June of 1963.¹² Like Brother Columba, Brother Lambert was known for his love of the poor, being described as large in both his portly physique and in his love for others through his constant intentionality of bringing food to the hungry and regularly engaging with the poor, wherever he was placed for ministry. Mrs. Rath seems to already recognize Brother Lambert's great love and begins to write letters to him after her visit.

The letter written to Brother Columba on December 12, following her visit to the Shrine, includes more simple messages of prayers, a donation to be given to someone in need, and she asks for prayers and advice regarding some friends of hers who have a sick son. This rather short letter is the last one we have from Mrs. Rath to Columba before a yearlong break, with the eleventh letter coming on December 28, 1922. However, it is likely that multiple letters were still written between Brother Columba and Mrs. Rath at this time, as the eleventh letter references a letter she wrote when she was thinking about Brother Columba and his good sister, Eliza.¹³

In the letter written on December 28, Mrs. Rath writes about her work of handing out Sacred Heart Badges and telling people about "our good Saint Brother Columba."¹⁴ This

¹² Bro. Lambert was a legendary figure in the community. For more information on him and his life, contact the Midwest Province of Brothers Archives. Lambert also had one of Sarah Rath's children in an address book later in his life.

¹³ Elizabeth O'Neill McNamara. Sometimes lovingly called Mac or Misses Mac.

¹⁴ Dec 28, 1922, letter from Mrs. Rath to Columba.

sharing of Brother Columba's Apostolate to the Sacred Heart became a clear mission of hers as each of her remaining letters discusses her continuing need of Sacred Heart badges. What started with her letter asking for prayers soon became a great friendship of devotion to the Sacred Heart and spreading that devotion to others. While we only have three letters from 1922 and 1923, there were likely more written with more details about the friendship that continued to grow between the Raths and Brother Columba, as they visited him again in June of 1923,¹⁵ just five months before he passed away. In the letter written after this visit, Mrs. Rath expresses her sadness about not being able to see Brother very long during their trip and how she hopes that he is feeling well as his sickness continues.

Now, two months before Brother Columba's passing, Mrs. Rath writes one more letter to her dear friend, reassuring him of her prayers for him and dearest hopes for his recovery. Mrs. Rath gives many thanks in this letter to Columba and acknowledges how much it grieves her to hear of his worsening condition. Even in her prayers and hope for his own healing, the emotional words of her final letter seem like a goodbye as she writes,

I almost hold my breath sometimes when I think of a sinner like me trying to help spread devotion to the Sacred Heart[.] Such a wonderful work fit only for saints like your own good self[.] I wish to thank you for your generous amount of Badges and novenas many times and for all the loving kindness you have shown to me. I am not forgetful of you in my prayers, especially at holy Mass mornings and while I feel you do not need them[,] still I know they are not lost[,] some poor soul gets them perhaps that has no one to pray for them[,] now dear Brother take every care of yourself, and I hope it won't be long till I will receive a little letter in your own hand writing[,] but do not try it until you are good and strong again[,] thanking you for all your kindness [...] with kindest love to you.¹⁶

¹⁵ June 1923 is when the photo of Bro. Columba behind the Community House is taken. Also in that month, he heals Sr. Lioba, and his niece Lyda O'Neill, the daughter of his youngest brother, Denis, visited him as the brothers did not expect him to live much longer.

¹⁶ Sept 24 1923 letter

To summarize, Mrs. Thomas Rath suffered from a severe infection of her kidneys and bladder in May of 1921. When doctors gave no hope for her recovery, she turned to Brother Columba, asking for his prayers and for a lamp to be kept lit for her health. She continued to write Brother Columba with updates on her health and for the lamp to continue being lit for her until September 10 of that same year, when she wrote to Columba about her recovery. From then on, she worked to promote the devotion to the Sacred Heart, spreading word about Columba's work in her own community and maintaining the friendship with him until his passing in 1923.