

**The Second Nun's Tale**  
**Geoffrey Chaucer**



**The Prologue of the Second Nun's Tale**

That minister and nurse unto sin which in the English tongue people call Idleness, the porter of the gate of voluptuousness, well ought we to endeavor to avoid and to put her down by her opposite, that is to say, by lawful activity, lest the Fiend through our idleness catch us. For he who continually watches to ensnare us with his thousand sly cords<sup>1</sup> can so lightly catch a man in his trap, when he can find him in idleness, that until a man be seized right by the hem of his garment, he is not aware that the Fiend has him in his grasp. We ought indeed to work and to withstand idleness. 14

And though people never feared to die, yet they see well, by unshaken reason, that idleness is rotten sloth, of which there never comes any good fruit. And they see that sloth holds her in a leash, only to sleep and eat and drink and to devour all that others get by labor. 21

And to keep from us such idleness, which is the cause of such great ruin, I have here faithfully endeavored in translating, according to *The Golden Legend*, your glorious life and passion, O you with your garland created of roses and lilies; I mean you, Saint Cecilia, maiden and martyr. 28

**Invocation to Mary**

And at my beginning on you, who art the flower of all virgins, of whom Bernard<sup>2</sup> loved so well to write, on you I first call. You comfort of us wretches, help me to relate your maiden's death, who through her merit won eternal life and victory over the Fiend, as one may read in her legend below. Maiden and mother, daughter of your Son, well of mercy, healer of sinful souls, in whom God of His goodness chose to dwell, meek and high above every creature, you did so much ennoble our human nature that the

<sup>1</sup> Cords. I.e., of his net.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux, French author and mystic (c1090-1153), known in part for his devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Maker of nature had no disdain to clothe and wrap His Son in flesh and blood. 42

The eternal Love and Peace, whom earth and sea and sky ever praise without ceasing, who is Lord and Guide of that threefold compass, took man's shape within the blessed cloister of your body. And thou, spotless virgin, bore from your body the Creator of every creature, and remained a pure maiden. In you are united magnificence with mercy, goodness, and such pity that you, who are the sun of excellence, not only do you help those who pray to you, but oftentimes out through your kindness, before they beg your help, you go before them freely, and are their life's physician. 56

You meek and blessed fair maiden, help me now, a wretched exile in this desert of bitterness. Think on the woman of Canaan, who said that whelps eat of the crumbs that drop from their master's table; and though I, an unworthy son<sup>3</sup> of Eve, may be sinful, yet accept my faith. And since faith is dead without works, give me wit and time so to work that I may be removed from that darkest place of all. 66

O, mother of Christ, dear daughter of Anne, so fair and full of grace, be my advocate in that high presence where Hosanna is sung without ceasing! And illumine by your light my imprisoned soul, which is troubled by the contagion of my body, and also by the weight of earthly desire and lying loves. O haven of refuge, O salvation of those in sorrow and distress, now help me, for I will turn to my labor. 77

Yet I pray you that read my words to forgive me though I make no effort to compose this story cunningly; for I have both words and thought from him who wrote the story in reverence for the saint, and I follow her legend; and I pray you that where there is need you will amend my work. 84

Interpretation of the name of Cecilia, as Brother Jacob of Genoa<sup>4</sup> put in his *Legenda Aurea*.

<sup>3</sup> Son. Though the phrase "sons of Eve" is sometimes used inclusively, the identity of the speaker here seems to be masculine. The speaker would otherwise seem to be feminine, i.e., that of the Second Nun. The passage below, however, suggests that the passage is being written rather than spoken, so the identity of the speaker may well be Chaucer himself, or at least Chaucer the narrator. If we follow the suggestion in the Prologue to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* that Chaucer had already written this tale, we might conjecture that Chaucer did not pay attention to this fine detail and simply included the work "as is."

<sup>4</sup> Jacob of Genoa. Jacobus Voragine, author of the *Legenda Aurea* or *The Golden Legend*.

I wish to expound to you first the name of the saint, as one may read in her history. It signifies, as one would say in English, "heaven's lily<sup>5</sup>;" her name was lily for the pure chastity of her virginity; or because she had the whiteness of honor and the green of conscience and the sweet savor of good fame, was she called a lily. Or Cecilia is as if one should say "the way for the blind<sup>6</sup>," because she was an example through her good teaching. 93

Or else, as I see in the books, the name Cecilia is compounded by a manner of joining "heaven" and "Leah<sup>7</sup>;" and here symbolically heaven is set forth for meditation upon holiness, and Leah for her ceaseless activity. Cecilia may also be interpreted "lacking blindness<sup>8</sup>," for her great light of wisdom, and for her shining virtues. Or else, lo, this maiden's bright name comes from "heaven" and "leos"; because one may well rightly call her, the example of all good and wise works, "heaven of people," for "leos" signifies people in English. 196

And even as one can see in the heaven the sun and the moon and everywhere the stars, even so may one see spiritually in this noble maiden the magnanimity of faith, and the perfect clearness of wisdom as well, and various bright and excellent works. And even as these philosophers say that heaven is swift and round and burning, so was the fair white Cecilia ever swift and diligent in good works, and perfect in her perseverance of goodness, and ever burning brightly with love. Now have I declared to you what her name signified." 119

Here ends the interpretation of the name of Cecilia.

### **Here begins the Second Nun's Tale, of the Life of Saint Cecilia.**

This maiden, bright Cecilia, as her life says, was Roman and of a noble family, and from her cradle onward fostered in the faith of Christ and bore his gospel in her mind. As the books say, she never ceased to pray and to love and fear God, beseeching him to protect her virginity. 126

And when this maiden was to be wedded to a man, who was called Valerian, very young in age, and the day of her wedding had arrived, very devoutly and meekly of spirit she had clad herself in a hair-shirt

<sup>5</sup> Heaven's lily. In Latin this would be "coili lilia."

<sup>6</sup> The way for the blind. In Latin, "caecis via."

<sup>7</sup> Heaven and Leah. In Latin, "caelo et Lya."

<sup>8</sup> Lacking Blindness. In Latin, "caecitate carens."

next to her flesh, and under her robe of gold that so fairly clothed her. And while the organ<sup>9</sup> made melody, thus she sang in her heart to God alone: "O Lord, keep my soul and my body unspotted, lest I be confounded." And for the love of Him who died upon a tree she fasted every second or third day, always praying earnestly in her prayers. 140

The night came when she needed to go with her husband, as is the custom; and soon she said to him secretly, "O sweet, dear, well-beloved spouse, there is a secret that I wish to tell you very gladly, if you will hear it, if you will swear not to betray me." 147

Valerian swore to her solemnly that he would nevermore betray her, for any reason or anything that might happen. And not until then she said to him, "I have an angel that loves me, and is ever ready to guard my body with great love, whether I am awake or asleep. And surely if he perceives that you touch me or love me ignobly, without delay he will slay you on the spot; and thus you would die in your youth. And if you protect me in clean love, he will love you as he loves me, for your purity, and show you his joy and his brightness." 161

Valerian, chastened as God willed, answered again, "If I am to trust you, let me behold and see that angel. And if it is a true angel, then I will do as you have asked me. And if you love another man, in truth I will slay you both with this very sword." 168

Cecilia answered quickly in this way, "That angel you shall see, if you wish, so long as you believe in Christ and are baptized. Go forth to the Appian Way," she said, "which lies just three miles from this town, and to the poor people that live there say exactly what I shall tell you. Say to them that I, Cecilia, sent you to them, to show you the old good Urban<sup>10</sup>, for a secret necessity and good purpose. And when you see Saint Urban, tell him the words that I told you; and when he has purged you from sin, then you shall see that angel, before you depart." 182

Valerian went to the place, and just as he was taught in his studies he found this holy old Urban lurking among the graves of the saints. And immediately, without delaying, he gave his message. 188

<sup>9</sup> Organ. It is perhaps this passage that led to the depiction of her playing an organ (and thus her reputation as a patron saint of music), though the original idea may have had nothing to do with her playing the organ.

<sup>10</sup> Urban. Pope Urban I, who served as pope from 222 until his beheading in 230. There may be a historical error here, though Chaucer was not responsible for it.

And when he told it, Urban held up his hands for joy, and tears dropped from his eyes. He said, "O Almighty Lord, Jesus Christ, Sower of chaste counsel, Shepherd of us all, take to Yourself the fruit of that seed of chastity which You have sown in Cecilia! Lo, like a busy bee, without deception, Your own subject Cecilia serves You at all times. For that very spouse, whom she took just now, like a fierce lion, she sends here to You, as meek as any lamb ever was." 199

And with that word immediately appeared an old man, clad in white shining garments, a book in his hand with letters of gold, and he stood before Valerian, who fell down as dead for fear when he saw him. And the aged man caught him up, and thus he read from his book: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God alone and Father of all, above all and over all everywhere." These words were all written in gold. 210

When this was read, this old man spoke, "Do you believe this thing, or not? Say yes or no." 212

"I believe all this," said Valerian, "for I dare well hold that no creature under heaven can think of a truer thing than this." Then the old man vanished, and Valerian knew not where; and Pope Urban christened him in that very place. 217

Valerian went home and found Cecilia standing in his chamber with an angel; this angel bore in his hands two crowns of lilies and roses. And first he gave the one to Cecilia, as I read, and then the other to Valerian, her husband. He said, "Always guard these crowns well, with pure body and unspotted thought; I have fetched them to you from Paradise. Nevermore shall they decay, believe me, or lose their sweet savor; and never shall any creature behold them with his eyes, unless he would be chaste and hate lust. And you, Valerian, because you also have so quickly agreed to good counsel, say what you wish to have, and you shall have your blessing." 234

"I have a brother," he answered, "and I love no man so in this world. I pray you that my brother may be granted grace to know the truth, as I do here." 239

The angel said, "Your request is pleasing to God, and you shall both come unto his blessed feast with the palm<sup>11</sup> of martyrdom." 241

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<sup>11</sup> Palm of martyrdom. Palms of victory are associated with martyr (those who die for their faith) and are almost always used in visual depictions of them.

And at these words Tiburce his brother came. And when he perceived the savor emitted by the roses and lilies, he began much to marvel in his heart, and said, "I wonder where that sweet savor of roses and lilies comes from that I smell at this season of the year. For even if I held them in my two hands, the savor could go no deeper in me. The sweet perfume that I feel in my heart has changed me into another nature." 252

Valerian said, "We have two crowns, snow-white and rose-red, clear-shining, which your eyes have no power to behold. And as you smell them through my prayer, so shall you see them, dear brother, if it may be that, without sloth, you will believe rightly and know the true faith." 259

Tiburce answered, "Do you say this to me in very truth, or do I hear it in a dream?" 261

"Surely in dreams," said Valerian, "have we been up to this time, my brother. But now first our dwelling is in truth." 264

"How do you know this? In what fashion?" asked Tiburce. 265

"That I shall tell you," answered Valerian. "The angel of God has taught me the truth. You shall behold him, if you will renounce the idols and be pure; and nothing else." 269

And of the miracle of the two crowns Saint Ambrose<sup>12</sup> wished to say in his preface; solemnly this noble, beloved doctor celebrates it and says thus: "To receive the palm of martyrdom, Saint Cecilia, filled with the gift of God, abandoned the world, and even the marriage-chamber; and of this testifies the confession of faith by Valerian and Tiburce, to whom God of his bounty deigned to grant two crowns of fragrant flowers, and sent them by his angel. The maiden brought these men to heavenly happiness. Truly, the world has learned of what price is devotion to chastity." 283

Then Cecilia showed him in clear and open words that all idols are nothing but a vain thing, for they are dumb and deaf; and she charged him to leave his idols. 287

"Whoever does not believe this, to speak it plainly, he is a beast," said Tiburce then. 289

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<sup>12</sup> Saint Ambrose. Bishop of Milan (c.340-97) who reputedly wrote the preface to the mass for Saint Cecilia's Day.

And she, hearing this, began to kiss his breast and was very glad that he could discern the truth. "I take you this day for my kinsman," said this beloved, blessed, fair maiden, and then spoke as you may hear: "Lo, even as the love of Christ made me your brother's wife, in that same manner I here from this point on take you for my kinsman, since you will scorn your idols. Go now with your brother, and be baptized and make yourself clean, so that you may see the angel's face of which your brother told." 301

Tiburce answered and said, "Dear brother, first tell me where I shall go, and to what man." 303

"To whom?" he said. "Come, with good cheer I will lead you to Urban the pope." 305

"To Urban?" said Tiburce. "My brother Valerian, will you lead me there? It seems to me that this would be a marvelous thing. Do you not mean that Urban who has been so often condemned to die, and ever remains in one nook and another, and dares not once put forth his head? If he were found, or if one could spy him out, they would burn him in such a red fire, and us also, to bear him company. And while we seek the Divinity that is secretly hidden in heaven, at all events we shall be burned in this world!" 318

To this Cecilia boldly answered, "One might well fear, and with reason, to lose this life, my own dear brother, if this were the only life, and there were no other. But there is a better life elsewhere, fear not, which never shall be lost, of which God's Son through His mercy has told us. That Father's Son created all things; and all that are created with reasonable intelligence the Spirit, That proceeded from the Father, has truly endowed with souls. By words and by miracles God's Son, when He was in this world, declared that there is another life where people may dwell." 332

To this Tiburce. answered, "O dear sister, did you not say just now that there is but one God, in truth, the Lord? And how can you now bear witness of three?" 336

"That I shall tell before I go," she said. "Just as a man has three faculties, memory, imagination and understanding, so in one divine being there may very well be three Persons." Then she earnestly preached to him of Christ's coming, and taught him of His pains and many points of His passion; how God's Son was kept in this world to bring forgiveness to mankind, which was bound in sin and painful troubles. 346

All this she expounded to Tiburce. And after this with earnest mind he went with Valerian to pope Urban, who thanked God, and with a light and glad heart christened him, and there made him perfect in his knowledge, and God's knight. And after this Tiburce had such favor that every day he saw the angel of God, in time and space. And every manner of prayer that he made to God, it was brought forth quickly. 357

It would be hard to tell in order how many miracles Jesus worked for them. But at last, to speak briefly and plainly, the officers of the town of Rome sought them out and brought them before Almachius the prefect, who questioned them and knew all their mind, and sent them to the image of Jupiter and said, "Whoever will not make a sacrifice, strike off his head. This is my sentence." 366

Immediately one Maximus, who was an officer to the prefect, and his clerk, seized these martyrs of whom I speak; and when he led forth the saints, he wept. And when he had heard the saints' instruction, he got permission from the executioners, and led them directly to his house; and by their preaching, before it was evening, they rooted out the false faith from the executioners, and from Maximus and from all of his people, and made them believe in God alone. 378

When night arrived, Cecilia came with priests, who baptized them all together. And afterwards, at daybreak, Cecilia said to the two with a grave expression, "Now, Christ's own beloved knights, put away all the works of darkness, and arm yourself in the armor of light. In truth you have fought a great battle, your course is finished, and you have preserved your faith; go to the unfading crown of life. The righteous Judge whom you have served shall give it to you, as you have won it." And when she had said this, men led them forth to do sacrifice. 392

But when they were brought to the place, to tell the event briefly, they would by no means offer sacrifice or incense, but with humble hearts and steadfast devotion went on their knees, and there lost their heads, both Valerian and Tiburce. Their souls went to the King of grace. Then this Maximus, who saw this thing, with piteous tears told that he had seen their souls glide to heaven with angels all bright and shining. And with his words he converted many, for which Almachius caused him to be so beaten with whips of lead that he lost his life. 406

Cecilia took him and then buried him gently beside Tiburce and Valerian, in her burial place, under the

stone. And then Almachius instantly ordered his ministers to fetch Cecilia openly, so that she might burn incense and make a sacrifice before Jupiter. But they, converted by her wise teaching, wept sorely and gave full credence to her word, and cried once and again, "Christ, God's Son, one and the same, Who has so good a servant to serve Him, is truly God: this is our full judgment; this we believe with full agreement, though we may die." 420

Almachius, who heard of this happening, ordered that Cecilia be fetched, that he might see her. And lo, this was his first demand, "What type of woman are you?" he said. 424

"I am a gentlewoman born," she answered. 425

"I ask you," he said, "though it may displease you, of your religion and your belief." 427

"You have begun your question foolishly," she said, "who would call for two answers to one demand. You asked in an ignorant fashion." 430

To that comparison Almachius answered, "From where does this saucy answering of yours come?" 432

"From where?" she said to that question. "From conscience and pious genuine faith." 434

Alinachius said, "Do you take no heed of my power?" 436

And she answered him in this way: "Your power is very little to be feared; for the power of every mortal man is truly but like a bladder, full of wind. For when it is blown up, all the boast of it may be laid low by a needle's point." 441

"You began wrongfully," he said, "and still in error you persevere. Do you not know how our mighty noble princes have commanded and made laws that all Christian creatures shall suffer penalty unless they renounce their Christianity; and shall go free if they renounce it?" 448

"Your princes err," said Cecilia then, "just as your nobility do; with a mad judgment and against the truth you make us guilty. For you who well know our innocence attribute to us blame and crime, because we pay honor to Christ and bear a Christian name. But we who know how potent that name is, cannot deny it." 457

Almachius answered, "Choose one of these two: make a sacrifice, or renounce Christianity, so that you may escape." 460

At this the fair, holy, blessed maiden began to laugh, and said to him, "O Judge, confounded in your folly, would you have me renounce innocence, to make me a wicked creature? Lo, he deceives here before all the people! He stares and acts like a madman as he looks about." 467

To this Almachius said, "Do you not know, unhappy wretch, how far my power may go? Have not our mighty princes given me both power and authority, yes, over life and death? Then why do you speak to me so proudly?" 473

"I speak but steadfastly," she said, "not proudly. For I say, for my part, we have deadly hatred for that sin of pride. And if you fear not to hear a truth, I will show openly and justly that you have uttered a great untruth. You say your princes have given you power both to slay a being and to give him life; you that can only take away life, you have no other power or permission! You have the right to say that your princes have made you a minister of death; but if you speak of more, you lie, for your power is naked." 486

"Away with your boldness," Almachius said then, "and sacrifice to our gods, before you depart. I care not what insult you lay on me, for I can face them like a philosopher; but I cannot endure the insults that you speak of our gods." 492

Cecilia answered, "O foolish creature, you have said no word while you have spoken with me that has not betrayed to me your folly, and that you are in all things an ignorant officer and a vain judge. There lacks nothing of blindness in your bodily eyes, for a thing that we all see to be stone, as one may easily perceive, that same stone you will call a god. I counsel you, since you see not with your blind eyes, let fall your hand upon it, and grope over it well, and you shall find it to be stone. It is a shame that the people shall so make a mockery of you and laugh at your folly, for people everywhere and universally know well that mighty God is in His high heavens; and these images can profit nothing to you nor to themselves, as you may easily see, for in effect they are not worth a mite." 511

These words and other such she said, and he grew angry and commanded that men should bring her home to her house "and there," he said, "burn her right in a bath of red flames." 515

And as he commanded, so it was done. For they shut her firmly in a bath, and day and night maintained a great fire beneath it. Through the long night and a day, for all the fire and the heat of the bath, she sat cold and felt no pain; it did not make her sweat even a drop. But in that bath she must lose her life; for Almachius with evil mind sent his order to slay her there. The executioner struck her three strokes on the neck, but in no way could he strike her neck apart. And because there was a law at that time that no one should give any person such punishment as to strike the fourth stroke, hard or soft, this executioner dared do no more; but he went his way and left her lying there with her neck cut, half-dead. 534

The Christian people about her gathered the blood gently with sheets. Three days she lived in this torment, and never ceased to instruct those whom she had fostered in the faith. To them she still preached, and she gave her effects and her goods to them. And then she committed them to Pope Urban, and said, "I asked this of the heavenly King, to have respite of three days and no more, that I might commend these souls to you, lo, before I depart; and that I might have a church made of my house to endure perpetually." 546

Saint Urban with his deacons secretly fetched the body and buried it by night honorably among his other saints. Her house is called Saint Cecilia's Church<sup>13</sup>. Saint Urban consecrated it, as he well had the power; and there, unto this day, in worthy manner many do service to Christ and his saint. 553

Here is ended the Second Nun's Tale.

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<sup>13</sup> Saint Cecilia's Church. There is such a church in Trastevere. There were others as well, including one in Florence.