

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

Promotor Fidei, a.k.a. The Devil's Advocate

Sr. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, the "Little Flower," the young Carmelite nun of Lisieux, France, whose short life (1873-1897) is memorialized in her autobiography *The Story of a Soul*, who after her death is said to have continued saving souls from heaven as she promised...it was this woman whose Cause for Beatification and Canonization was approved to be opened by Pope Pius X in 1914. Family, friends, fellow Carmelite Sisters and devotees to the late Sr. Thérèse of the Child Jesus throughout the world rejoiced. They anticipated for her a straight, unhindered path to sainthood--surely no one could possibly bring forth objections regarding this woman's sanctity. But someone did. In April 1914, Msgr. Alexander Verde presented the lawyers favorable to Thérèse as a candidate for sainthood with a lengthy, detailed report: "The Objections of Monsignor Alexander Verde to the Canonization of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus" (title translated from Latin). Verde had nothing personal against the candidate. As *Promotor Fidei*, an official of the Roman Congregation of Rights, he was simply doing his job.

Although Church officials performing similar duties to that of the Promotor Fidei--meaning Promoter of the Faith--are recorded as early as the 14th century, most historians agree that the official office was instituted by Pope Sixtus V in 1587 and more clearly defined in 1708 by Pope Clement XI. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the Promotor Fidei's main duties were performed during the processes of beatification and canonization, which were conducted by the Congregation of Rites. His role was to "...prevent any rash decisions concerning miracles or virtues of the candidates." All documents and testimonies regarding the candidates had to be presented to the Promotor Fidei for his scrutiny. It was his duty to suggest natural explanations for "alleged" miracles and to "...even bring forward human and selfish motives for deeds that had been accounted 'heroic virtues.'" Because of these duties, the Promotor Fidei was humorously dubbed *Advocatus Diaboli*, the Devil's Advocate (someone who argues against a point he is actually in favor of in order to test the argument for flaws or weaknesses).

The arguments against candidate Sr. Thérèse of the Child Jesus that Msgr. Verde included in his report fell mainly into two categories. The first concerned her autobiography *The Story of a Soul*. Because Sr. Thérèse spent all of her short adult life living in a cloistered convent, Msgr. Verde suggested that the holiness attributed to her was all self-reported through her writings. He wrote, "If the Servant of God had not, in her writings, related the heavenly elevations that Christ Our Lord had granted in her affirmations, no one, probably, would ever have thought she was a saint or had heroic virtues." The second category under which Msgr. Verde voiced several objections involved the virtue of humility. One of his strongest statements concerned the fact that by the testimony of her own biological sisters who were nuns in the same Carmelite convent as Sr. Thérèse, Sr. Thérèse advised them while on her death bed to be sure to collect relics from her. "This was hardly a sign of self-abasement," he commented. Over the next several years of the beatification and canonization process, his report was duly examined and included in the body of evidence and documents by the lawyers handling Sr. Thérèse's Cause. Msgr. Verde followed the proceedings with great interest and did eventually sign the official

documents in favor of her canonization. In 1921, Pope Benedict XV dispensed the requirement of a fifty year delay between the candidate's death and sanctification and he declared Sr. Thérèse of the Child Jesus to be Venerable. She was later beatified in 1923 and canonized May 17, 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II reformed and redefined the position of Promotor Fidei, the new title being Prelate Theologian. In this role his duties are largely administrative and include overseeing cardinals and bishops meetings. He no longer has the authority to veto a candidate's Cause, although he can provide a report to beatification and canonization hearings that puts forth any objections or concerns. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the current process of canonization, once documentary evidence is submitted from a diocese or eparchy (province of the Orthodox Church), is handled in Rome by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Eventually all evidence of heroic virtue, miracles, and/or martyrdom as well as any objections are examined by nine theologians; if the majority are in favor, the Cause is further examined by cardinals and bishops of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. If their judgment is favorable all results and documents from the Cause are presented to the Pope who will ultimately authorize (or deny) the final phases toward eventual canonization.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, has millions of devotees worldwide. We celebrate her feast day on October 1. San Antonio's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower and Little Flower School are named in her honor. The San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum is interested in receiving stories of special devotions you hold in your homes, the domestic church. These can be sent to the museum at 1201 Donaldson, San Antonio, TX 78228 or emailed to muldoonkathleen12@gmail.com or vvalenzuela@saintpaulsa.org. Call 210-733-7152 for further information.



Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus, a novice at age 16. (Photo from Carmelite Sisters of Lisieux Archives.)



**Msgr. Alexander Verde, *Promoter Fidei* in Canonization
Cause of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus. (Photo from Carmelite
Sisters of Lisieux Archives)**