

Cardinal Kung Academy: Saints in the Family!

STAMFORD—As Catholics throughout the Diocese of Bridgeport celebrated All Saints Day on November 1st, the students and families of Cardinal Kung Academy had special reason to celebrate: two of the high school students have canonized relatives. Vincent Morlino (11th Grade) counts in his family tree St. Mary Katharine Kasper, the foundress of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ in Germany, and Natalia Benischek (9th Grade) is the great-great niece of the martyr St. Justino Orona Madrigal of Mexico. Cardinal Kung Academy is a classical junior-senior high school named for Ignatius Cardinal Kung, the first native Chinese Bishop of Shanghai. Like St. Mary Katharine and St. Justino, Cardinal Kung stood firm in the faith despite an oppressive regime, spending thirty years in prison and a further ten years under house arrest under the Communist regime.

Katharine Kasper was born on May 26th, 1820, the seventh of eight children in a poor farming family. In her youth, Katharine worked in the fields and learned to weave to help support her family. She also showed an early devotion to Christ, frequenting a local Marian shrine with her siblings and other children to share religious stories and songs. It was during this time that Katharine developed a sensitivity to the voice of God calling her to serve Him in others.

Although she desired to help people as a nurse, Katharine needed to support and care for her mother after the deaths of her father and brother.

In the 1840's, Katharine and four other young women gathered together to live in community

to pray and serve the poor. As Vincent describes, “St. Mary Katherine Kasper and her sisters performed every corporal work of mercy out of love for God and neighbor. Even when they had no money or resources, she would trust in God’s providence to provide for them, which of course He did.” In 1851, they received the religious habit under the name of the Congregation of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ, and Katharine took the name Mary in religious life. By 1868, the congregation had been invited to serve German immigrants in the Diocese of Fort Wayne, Indiana.



St. Mary Katharine, herself, did not travel to the United States. Instead, she remained in Germany, where the Catholic Church was under the persecution of the government. From 1871 to 1887, German Chancellor Otto von Bismark's *Kulturkampf* ("culture struggle") sought to end German Catholics' allegiance to the Pope in Rome and subject the Church to a government agency. During this time, life became increasingly difficult for Catholic religious, whose religious habits and celibacy were a constant source of consternation. The Jesuit order was dissolved in Germany, religious were forced out of teaching positions, and the government sought to regulate seminary training and liturgical practices. Nonetheless, St. Mary Katharine continued to listen to the voice of God in a hostile time, and by her death in 1898, the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ had over 190 houses throughout the world.

In 1978, Pope St. Paul VI beatified St. Mary Katharine with Vincent's grandmother and great-grandmother present, and in 2018, Vincent travelled with his family to Rome when Pope Francis canonized St. Katharine alongside Paul VI. "Being at the Vatican and witnessing the canonization of my relative, St. Mary Katharine Kasper, was one of the most memorable experiences of my life," Vincent said. "It was very inspiring to see fellow Catholics from around the world come to honor her, as well as six other saints, including Pope Paul VI."



A generation later, St. Justino Orona Madrigal was born on the feast of St. Justin Martyr, April 14th, 1877 in Atoyac, Mexico. He was named for the great martyr of the early Church, prefiguring the kind of death that Justino himself would suffer. Although he was born into a very poor family, Justino was able to study and attend the seminary, and at the age of 27, he was ordained a priest. As a pastor in Cuquío (Guadalupe), Justino was attentive to the needs of orphans and poor children among his flock, and he founded the Congregation of the Claretian Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

In 1917, the Mexican government adopted a new constitution that was favorable to socialism and hostile to the Church, and a series of anti-clerical laws followed under the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles in the 1920's. Local governments could set

limits on the number of priests or liturgical celebrations in their regions. Priests could not vote or even wear their clerical attire in public, and these “crimes” could forfeit one’s right to trial. From 1926-1929, “Cristero” rebels resisted government oppression of the Church, even against the overwhelming military force pursuing them. Although persecution became more intense, Fr. Justino continued to serve his parish. “St. Justino was a holy martyr and a witness for Jesus Christ. He would rather die than abandon God and his people,” Natalia explains. As federal forces advanced, Justino joined his brother on a nearby ranch. At dawn on July 1st, 1928, the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, Justino opened the door to the Mayor of Cuquío and federal forces, shouted the Cristero motto, “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” (“Long live Christ the King!”), and he was shot. His body was left in the square as a warning to other priests and Catholics. St. Justino was canonized by Pope St. John Paul II in 2000.

At the All Saints Day Mass, CKA chaplain and theology teacher Fr. Joseph Gill preached about the various paths that the saints have taken to glory as teachers, religious, kings, parents, and more. While we have thousands of canonized saints whose stories are known to us, All Saints Day is distinct for reminding Catholics of the millions of saints whose stories are lost to history but whose love of God was just as strong. These saints, Fr. Gill told the students and their families, intercede for all of us and encourage us to think that even we and members of our own families are called to sainthood.

In the canon of the Mass, Vincent and Natalia heard the names of their relatives as proof that sanctity is not an impossible goal. For Vincent, the saint he has come to know so well is an example of love of neighbor and trust in God: “St. Mary Katharine Kasper is a great example for how always to treat our fellow man with kindness. It is encouraging to be able to pray to a saint in my own family, especially to one who devoted her life so entirely to doing God’s will.” For Natalia, her great-great uncle is an inspiration for Catholics in a culture moving further from faith: “As part of the Church militant, we have a duty to preserve our faith at all costs and ignite it in others.” She prays, “May he intercede for us and inspire us to have an immovable faith and a burning love for Jesus. ¡Viva Cristo Rey!” For everyone at the Mass, the celebration of saints among CKA families was a reminder that, despite difficult times, we are all called to be saints in Heaven.