

THE STORY OF SAINT FLORIAN

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A while back I wrote an article about our Shrine of Saint Michael and how it came into being as a result of the parish's need to pray about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The oversight of this shrine has been taken in hand unofficially by the Military Matters Committee. We gather there for prayer after every one of our meetings. Saint Michael the Archangel is the patron saint of both the military and the police, but a year or so ago the committee recognized that we should also remember our firefighters at this shrine, and accordingly, with the permission of the rector and the vestry, we commissioned an icon of Saint Florian, patron saint of firefighters, to be placed in the shrine. The icon has been written by Father Tobias Haller, B.S.G., formerly rector of St. James, Fordham, in the Bronx, New York, who is a renowned iconographer. The icon is complete and will soon be installed in the shrine.

Florian was born about 250 in a part of the Roman Empire which is now in Austria. He was a Roman soldier, and one of his responsibilities was organizing firefighting brigades. During the persecution of Christians under Diocletian, it was reported that Florian, by this time a commander, was not enforcing the Emperor's edict against Christians. An investigator sent from Rome ordered Florian to sacrifice to the Roman gods, and when he refused, he was sentenced to be burned at the stake, but the judge, fearing that Florian would somehow escape the flames, ordered him to be drowned in the river instead. He is venerated as the patron saint of firefighters, chimney sweeps, and soap boilers (probably because of the association with fire), and of the cities of Linz, Austria, and Krakow, Poland. The name Florian is a common male name in Eastern Europe.

In Austria and Germany fire services use the name Florian as a call sign for radio communications. There is in the German language something called the Florian Principle, named for a somewhat ironic prayer to Saint Florian: "*O heiliger Sankt Florian, verschon' mein Haus, zünd' and're an.*" (O holy saint Florian, spare my house, light up another one.) This is the German equivalent of the English expression "Not in my back yard," in which the speaker tries to get out of an unpleasant situation by wishing the same situation on others.

I have seen a preview of the icon, and I think we will like it. Watch for further information concerning its installation and dedication.