By Jim Bradshaw

It was in 1946 that Mary Wilson continued her doctors and nurses from her deathbed at the Sacred Heart Convent at Grand Coteau. She said her care was a miracle worked through the intercession of John Berchmans, a seminarian who had died 256 years before. Nobody else has any other explanation.

Berchmans was born in Désert, Belgium, on March 15, 1591. As a young man he studied to become a Jesuit priest, but died in 1621, before he could be ordained.

In 1946, the year before Mary's illness, Pius XI had approved Berchmans' beatification, the first step toward recognition by the Catholic Church as a saint.

The beatification brought Berchmans into the public eye, and perhaps inspired a special devotion from young Mary, who feared that — like Berchmans — her ill health would keep her from reaching her final vows in the Church.

Mary was born in New London, Canada, on September 29, 1892. When she was 16 she took a trip to St. Louis, where she met Mother Mary Colette Ciwinski who introduced her to the faith. She was received into the Church on May 25, 1916, but was never in perfect health — began preparation to become a nun of the Society of the Sacred Heart. The sisters sent her to the United States to continue her studies, thinking that the gentler climate would be better for her health.

She went first, in June 1916, to St. Louis where she made her novitiate on the staff of the Motherhouse in St. Louis. In September 1916 she was sent to Grand Coteau, where she hoped to receive the habit of the Sacred Heart Sisters a month later.

We have our own account of the events preceding the Miracle of Grand Coteau:

On the 13th of October I was obliged to repair to the infirmary, and I did not leave it until the 13th of December, the day after the one on which God was pleased to manifest His Power and Mercy in my behalf. During this time I was extremely ill, vomiting blood two and three times a day, with constant fever and violent headaches the greater part of the time; and still the pains in my head continued.

My suffering were intense, and I had a most unendurable disgust for food of all kind. Vomiting however, to the referred solicitations of the doctor in attendance, I consented to try and force myself to my mouth and imbibed. I did not, and the result was that I brought it up again, and I lay unconscious for twelve hours.

This was on the seventh of November, at which time Extreme Unction (the Church's rite for the dying) was administered.

From this time till the seventh of December I remained a great deal of time in the infirmary, without feeling anything, but relief of short duration. On the very next day I was found worse than I had ever been before. All hopes of getting better abandoned me. I felt I was getting weaker, and my sufferings more and more intolerable that it seemed to me that it was impossible to bear them long.

This was on December 7. On the eleventh the Father gave me the last plenary indulgence. One of our dear Mothers brought me a picture of Blessed Berchmans on the stuns and said that the community was going to make a novena to Blessed Berchmans.

The third day of my novena, my illness seemed to assume a more alarming aspect, and for five days I suffered intensely. During the last three, especially, I endured the pang of death. My body was drawn up with pain, my hands and feet were crumpled and as cold as death. All my ailments had turned to inflammation of the stomach and throat. My tongue was raw and swollen, and I was not able to speak for two days. At each attempt to utter a word, the blood would gush from my mouth.

I do not think I had eaten an ounce of food for about forty days. During that time I had taken nothing but a little coffee or tea, which, however, I could no longer take. Yet, neither medicine nor medical treatment had been administered. The doctor said I was useless to torture me no more. So he stopped giving me any. The last fruit I had eaten was the morning I was taken even a drop of water.

Friday morning, after a night of intense suffering, the Reverend Mother gave me Holy Communion in the chapel of the Sacred Heart. I sat up in bed. I felt no pain. I was afraid it was not real. I turned over in my bed, and then I saw it was real, Blessed Berchmans had cured me.

The sister informan soon returned from the chapel and made me act of thanksgiving before a little altar in the infirmary. I did not speak to her. In about three quarters of an hour the Reverend Mother Superior came in to see me, fearing at the time to find me in the agonies of death. She was greatly surprised, when she met my eyes, which had not been opened for 18 days, and hear me with her 'Good morning.'

Reverend Mother, in utter amazement drew back and exclaimed: And what, those eyes! Then seeing my mouth perfectly healed, she added: That is real. I told her that I was cured and had recovered the use of my eyes and tongue, and craved permission to get up. Mother then approached and kissed me. She then questioned me over and over again, and on my repeated assurance that I was well and felt no pain, she hastened to call in several persons of the community to see me.

As yet Mother had no idea of the miracle and feared that this sudden change for the better was but the forerunner of my approaching death. She therefore continued praying for me to get up.

At six o'clock that evening I walked across the infirmary to have to my bed. (According to one who witnessed the scene with a chair around the infirmary.) Next morning for breakfast I ate some chicken and drank a cup of coffee. At twelve o'clock I ate a hearty dinner, and at half past twelve I finally received the desired permission to get up and dress. Which I did with as much alacrity of heart as activity of body.

The doctor called to me that evening, and what a surprise to see me meet him at the door. He did not realize the fact, and in his amazement he repeated over and over again: "What? A miracle, Mary, up and dressed? Is it possible? How extraordinary!" He then acknowledged me so overdoze that he almost fainted. Feeling its effect, he said: "It is, you doctor, who needs a cure!"

Doctor examined the condition of my eyes and found to be in good health, and that my sight that of a person who had not been my eyes for several years. My sight was to be in perfect health. The good doctor examined my internal organs and found that I had not been cured. My body was brought to the Church and I was expressed in the shape of a miracle.

The sister informan returned from the chapel and made me act of thanksgiving before a little altar in the infirmary. I did not speak to her. In about three quarters of an hour the Reverend Father Superior came in to see me, fearing at the same time to find me in the agonies of death. I was greatly surprised, when she met my eyes, which had not been opened for 18 days, and hear me with her 'Good morning.'
Miracle

As for myself, I felt as well as I ever did in my life. I ate five times during that day, assisted kneeling at Benediction or the Blessed Sacrament given in adoration, with confessions of the penitent, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at half past six, and then on the following day, Monday, December 17, I was again supported by the same invisible means, and was able to follow all the exercises of religious life. From that moment, I felt that I was in an instant restored to perfect health without a moment's convalescence.

The archives of the convent at Grand Caissie contain the sworn statements of two doctors, James G. Campbell and Edward Millard, who examined Mary Wilson before her death.

From Dr. Millard's statement of February 8, 1867:

Not being able to discover any marks of convalescence, but an immediate return to health from a seemingly severe and painful illness, I am unable to explain the transition by any ordinary natural cause.

Also in the convent archives are many testimonies from the three priests who had helped Mary through her illness and had given her the last sacraments. Each attests the love was real, sincere, and immediate.

On February 11, 1867, an official account of the cure and the support of the convent was sent to the Archbishop of New Orleans. The Archbishop's investigation revealed the case to be genuine.

The Pope Leo XIII accepted the Miracle of Grand Caissie as authentic and canonized John Berchmans as a saint of the Church.

Dr. Millard's statement makes it clear that Mary Wilson was not cured by any medical intervention. The case was confirmed by three priests and the local bishop. The Pope's decision was based on the evidence presented.

Mary Wilson is buried in the current cemetery of Grand Caissie, in a spot she chose herself. The sacred interment is now a shrine. The Feast of St. John Berchmans is celebrated in August 12.