

# Woman fulfills promise to Portuguese saint

By Father Robert F. McNamara  
Guest contributor

Forty years ago, Maria Dias vowed she would honor an obscure Portuguese countryman and candidate for sainthood if he interceded on her behalf.

In September, 1989, Father Dominic Mockevicius, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Churchville, formally dedicated a shrine to St. John de Britto in the home of Dias, who credits the saint with preserving her life.

I came to know of the rescue and the vow in April, 1988, when I was asked to help her find a statue of St. John. It is a fascinating story.

Since I spent many years teaching church history, I am often asked to supply data on various saints. Early in the spring last year, one of the sisters at the Cenacle Retreat House in Rochester telephoned me to see what I knew about a certain Portuguese saint.

She said that a local Portuguese woman wanted to find a statue of him, but had failed to do so in Portugal, Brazil, Spain, or elsewhere in the United States.

From the name given me, I concluded that the holy person in question was St. John de Britto, a Jesuit missionary and martyr. I knew only the name but I soon found a few brief life-sketches of him. I copied them and sent them to the Churchville woman.

John de Britto, I learned, was indeed Portuguese. Born in Lisbon in 1647, he belonged to the highest ranks of the nobility. At age 15, however, he turned his back on courtly life and joined the Society of Jesus.

Since he aspired to be a missionary, he was assigned, after ordination, to southeast India, where the Jesuits had a mission centered at Madura (now called Madurai).

Robert de' Nobili, an Italian Jesuit, had established the Madura Mission in 1606. In order to ease his approach to the social castes of India, Father de' Nobili had decided to become "an Indian among Indians." He therefore adopted the garb of a Brahmin teacher or "guru," and holy man "sannyasi." The priest shunned — as do the Hindus — meat and wine, and perfected his knowledge of Tamil, the local language. Father de Britto followed the same wise practice. This enabled him to befriend and convert people of the upper class who would otherwise have ignored him.

Despite these successes, Father de Britto had a hard life. His mission journeys, usually afoot, took him through harsh and torrid country: a special burden for a man of uncertain health. And countering the welcome he received from a few was increasingly bitter opposition from fanatical Hindu priests.

Father de Britto and some of his Christians were seized in 1686 and ordered to pay homage to the Hindu deity Siva. When they refused, they were tortured brutally. It was almost a miracle that the missionary survived.

When he was called to Lisbon in 1688 on church business, his associates urged the priest not to return to so risky a mission. But Father de Britto brushed aside all such counsel. Once back at Madura, he had the good fortune to receive into the church a Maravese prince, the Poligar of Siruvalli.

Polygamous converts were required, prior to baptism, to dismiss all their wives but one, and the Poligar did so. But one of the dismissed wives, who was the niece of a king, sought to revenge herself by stirring up a persecution of the Christians.

Father de Britto was again arrested, and, at the command of Rajah Raghunatha, was beheaded at Oriyur on February 4, 1693. He had welcomed death in defense of Christian marriage as "a great reward." Pope Pius IX beatified him as a martyr in 1853.

Because Father de Britto had died in India, I suggested to Maria Dias that India was the best place to inquire about a



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In honor of a vow made 40 years ago, Maria Dias and her husband, John, have erected a shrine to St. John de Britto at their home. Although John de Britto is a Portuguese saint, the couple had to obtain his statue from Oriyur, India, where the missionary was beheaded in 1693, following many years of service.

statue of him. But where was his shrine?

I called a Jesuit friend at Georgetown University to pose that question. Fortunately, he lived across the hall from a couple of Jesuits from India. These men assured me that the martyr's shrine was at Oriyur, the place of his death, and they gave me the name of the pastor, Father Joseph Nedungatt, S.J.

A month later I received an encouraging reply from Father Nedungatt. He could supply us with a statue of St. John. His only caution was that the shipping costs would exceed the cost of the statue.

Maria Dias was delighted with the good news. She instructed me to order the image at once. Then she told me the full story of her vow.

Maria de Freitas Branco was born in 1917 in the Portuguese islands of Madeira, some 300 miles west of Morocco in the Atlantic. In 1940, when she was 22, she became engaged to a Portuguese man, John Nunes, who was already living in Rochester.

The wedding would take place here. The year 1940 was not the best time to cross the Atlantic. World War II had already begun, and although the United States was still neutral, German ships were already policing the ocean.

Maria set out nonetheless on her lonely journey. She had first to sail to Lisbon, some 400 miles to the northeast, to find a ship bound for New York. The ship was not on hand at Lisbon, so she had to wait there a full month before embarking.

Finally, on August 27, she was able to board a Greek ship, the SS Niellas. A freighter laden with bananas, wine and other foodstuffs, it also carried 325 passengers.

The passengers were naturally afraid of encountering ships of the warring nations. A German ship did indeed flag them down when they were half-way across, and ordered the "Nielas" to stop. But after an hour, the Germans allowed the freighter to pass, probably because it was from Greece and was carrying no war equipment.

The real shock came in the middle of New York Harbor. There the Greek ship, by some awful mischance, collided with the SS Litiopa, an oil tanker from Norway.

It was a dreadful moment. Would the ships sink in the very sight of shore? The passengers on both vessels were frantic. Maria turned at once to prayer. She prayed espe-

cially to Blessed John de Britto, thinking that another miracle would hasten his canonization. She promised that if he should see her safely ashore, she would, out of gratitude, erect a little shrine in honor of him in her American home.

The damage was not grave. After a two-hour delay, the freighter slid into her berth at New York City. The date was September 12, 1940. One can easily imagine Maria's joy at feeling solid ground once more beneath her feet after the 15-day crossing.

With her fiance, John, and a delegation from Rochester, she set out for the Flower City. The wedding took place at St. Augustine's Church on Oct. 5, and the newlyweds settled down in their Rochester home.

But Maria did not forget her promise to Blessed John de Britto, who was canonized by Pope Pius XII in 1947. She began the long quest for his statue to adorn the promised shrine.

Father Nedungatt mailed me the image of the saint in late June, 1988. When the package arrived in early August, I called Maria in to pick it up. The simple plaster statue represented St. John in his "guru" garb: a turban with head veil; a colored tunic over a white under-tunic, and sandals.

Meticulously packed and nailed into a custom-made wooden box, the statue's wrapping was even more exotic — cotton cloth, stitched on rather than glued. One whole side was covered by curious Indian postage stamps. The address had been inscribed in black ink with handsome letters.

And as if the parcel's appearance were not enough to declare its oriental origin, there arose from the wrapping the sweet, strange odor of curry. The cloth must have come from a sack that had held this favorite Indian spice.

This past summer, Maria Dias was finally able to construct the little "house-like" shrine. (She had recently married John Dias after the deaths of her first husband, John Nunes, and her second, Manuel Cardozo).

Originally, she had intended to place the shrine in the garden, but because she feared the statue might not weather well outdoors, she decided to keep it inside. A crowd of relatives and friends were on hand for the blessing.

Thus was the vow fulfilled after 48 years. St. John de Britto may have been rejected by the nabobs of Ramanthapuram, but he was certainly given a grateful welcome by his fellow-countrymen of Churchville.



Father Dominic Mockevicius, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Churchville, formally dedicated the shrine in September, 1989.