

The illustration is a medieval-style painting. In the center, the Virgin Mary is depicted in a long, flowing white gown with a blue mantle. She holds a white lily in her right hand and has her left hand resting on the head of a man kneeling before her. The man is wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern and is looking up at Mary with an expression of awe or devotion. In the background, to the right, a group of men in white robes are watching the scene. To the left, there is a large, ornate golden altar or shrine. The overall style is characterized by soft, blended colors and a sense of sacredness.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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13. The Western Reality of Religious Performers

Rather than comprising translations or retellings of tales from long ago, this section presents in chronological order thumbnail sketches of a half dozen individuals who performed as dancers, clowns, or acrobats even after taking formal vows within Catholicism. Their activities usually created frictions with the hierarchy, which over the centuries has manifested an intense ambivalence toward unsanctioned physicality as an expression of devotion, above all within formal settings. The Church regulates praise and prayer. By the same token, its decrees determine what constitutes a miracle and who becomes a saint. Rare non-conformists have devised rituals of their own, sometimes out of a faith that ordinary life and entertainment have a capacity to be transcendent. The fate of these extraordinary people has run the gamut. At least two performers have been canonized. Most others, while not coming close to achieving sanctity, have at least negotiated a *modus vivendi* with the ecclesiastic authorities. One left the priesthood.

A. Saint Paschal Baylon

The earliest of the six examples, Paschal Baylon was born in Aragon, in Spain, in 1540. He died in 1592. Of peasant stock, he was destined to be a herdsman. His given name, sometimes made into the Spanish diminutive Pascualito, refers to Easter: the Latin adjective *Paschalis* derives from the word for Passover taken by Greek via Aramaic from Hebrew. The saint's second name, Baylon, suggests "[one fond of dancing](#)." He may have picked up this nickname from his unusual way of honoring the Virgin.

Devoted to the Mother of God, Paschal taught himself to read so as to follow *The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, the prayerbook most favored in his day among laypeople. An ascetic, he went barefoot, fasted often, and ate only simple fare. Beneath his shepherd's cloak he wore an improvised friar's habit. In 1564, his longing to become a Franciscan was finally fulfilled when he entered the reformed friary of the Blessed Virgin of Loreto in Valencia as a lay brother.

According to tradition, he was appointed cook. A beautiful statue of Mary stood above a doorway of the frater. Paschal decked the altar there whenever he could with fresh-cut flowers. On feast days he put out candles. While fulfilling his duties, he would

sing quiet songs of praise to the Mother of God. Once a fellow Franciscan caught him doing rhythmic steps of joy, prancing backward and forward in a rudimentary [gypsy dance, before the statue](#). The image allegedly assumed a real body and blessed the saint-to-be. Another legend relates to Paschal's engagement with heretics in Calvinist France. On the homeward journey he first prayed before his walking staff and then broke into a jubilant jig.



Fig. 15: *San Pascual Bailón*. Comic illustration, 1961. Published in *Vidas ejemplares* 7.113 (November 15, 1961). Caption: "Then, filled with joy, he sang and danced like a madman."

In this case he danced, but without the explicit Marian connection of his previous antics in the dining room.

Paschal's cult has developed especially strong ties to [dance in the Philippines](#). In the eighteenth century, Spanish Franciscan missionaries there built a church dedicated to him in Obando, on the island of Luzon. Thanks to the connotations of Baylon, the saint became associated with the "Obando Fertility Rites." These three days feature dancing on the streets by men, women, and children in traditional costumes. The festival begins on the official feast of Paschal on May 17. On that day and the two that succeed it, a likeness of the patron saint of the day heads the procession as lead dancer.

B. Saint [John Bosco](#)

The second person of interest is Saint John Bosco. This Italian priest, who was born in 1815 and died in 1888, drew youths into Catholic values by innovative methods, which included following and preceding prayer with presentations of juggling, acrobatics, and magic. But let us begin at the beginning. Bosco grew up fatherless and impoverished in the region of Piedmont, in the north of Italy. At the age of nine or ten,

he had the first of several life-determining dreams. In it, he saw himself in a field with young delinquents who played and cursed. After he failed to stop their misbehavior, a man of noble dress and bearing counseled him to win over the boys by being gentle and softhearted. A woman appeared, at which point the band of youths turned into wild animals. When she put out her hand, they changed into lambs.

By watching traveling showmen, Bosco learned juggling, tightrope walking, and magic tricks.

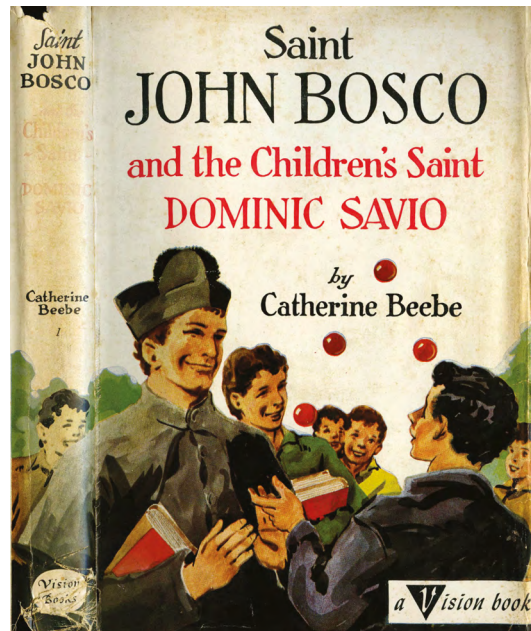


Fig. 16: Front cover of Catherine Beebe, *Saint John Bosco and the Children's Saint Dominic Savio*, illus. Robb Beebe (London: Vision Books, 1955). All rights reserved.

He played the class clown among his peers, but he would round off his repertoire with prayers. Supposedly changing pebbles into coins became a trademark stunt. In the decade that followed, he became a cleric and founded the Society of Saint Francis de Sales. The Salesians, as members were called, were divided into priests, seminarians, and lay brothers (known technically as coadjutors). Bosco, canonized in 1935, is regarded as the patron of stage magicians. On his feast day, Catholic illusionists sometimes venerate him by offering free magic shows to poor children.

C. Ruth St. Denis

Our third focus of attention, an American modern dancer, takes us forward to the mid-1930s. Ruth St. Denis, whose life extended from 1879 to 1968, had long been interested in dance as a medium for [spiritual expression](#), and she even defined her shows as

"religion-art." In the mid-1930s she launched a performing ensemble called the [Society of Spiritual Arts](#). She specialized in [dancing on Christian themes](#) in churches to the accompaniment of music.

The most important of these shows was "The Masque of Mary," which premiered in 1934 at Riverside Church in New York. After an organ prelude and Gospel readings, St. Denis was introduced. In the guise of the White Madonna, she was posed on an altar, with thick facial makeup and equally heavy and bright nail polish on her fingers and toes, and with veils wound around her.



Fig. 17: Ruth St. Denis as the White Madonna in *The Masque of Mary* (Riverside Church, New York). Photograph, 1934. Photographer unknown.

Around her "The Angels of the Heavenly Host" danced joyously. When these ethereal beings ceased their movements, the lead dancer did what was tantamount to a sacred striptease by peeling back the layers of milky white to disclose a gown of deep turquoise. Now as the Blue Madonna, she presented balletic vignettes that illustrated major moments in the Virgin's life.

On Sunday, February 25, 1935, St. Denis celebrated a religious dance before the altar in Central Presbyterian, another Manhattan church. In this instance, her decision to color her toenails led to scandal, with heated [denunciations of dancing](#) in buildings used for worship.

D. [Mireille Nègre](#)

Mireille Nègre, the fourth individual, was born in 1943. She is a French ballerina who turned nun. Once she took the habit, her longing to dance for God put her at odds with

the ecclesiastical hierarchy later in the twentieth century. But, once again, let us begin at the beginning.

As a two-year-old, Nègre suffered the loss of two toes in an elevator accident in Paris. At four she was encouraged to take lessons in classical dance, to correct the limp that she developed. By the age of seven she had made such headway in her studies that she was put forward at the French National Opera. As an adolescent, she achieved ever greater success in ballet there and eventually became the first dancer.

Nègre's commitment to dance was soon equaled or even surpassed by her attraction to a religious life. At the age of twelve, she had an epiphany. In 1965 she took a retreat in a convent and had the revelation of her religious calling, but she still wavered between dance and a spiritual vocation. In 1973, at twenty-nine, she entered the Carmelites of Limoges, a fervently Marian order, on a probationary basis.

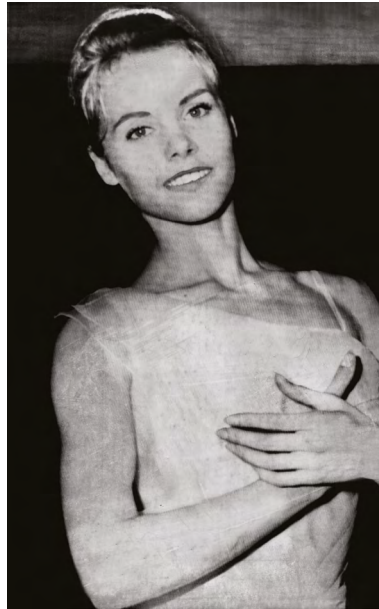


Fig. 18: Portrait of Mireille Nègre. Photograph, 1973. Photographer unknown. Argenta Images. All rights reserved.

For three of Nègre's ten years in the convent, she mainly embraced the contemplation and asceticism expected of her. Yet though required to abdicate the enticements of the body and with it dance, she displayed flashes of resistance and insubordination. For instance, she would strike the balletic pose known as an arabesque while plying a broom in the refectory. When caught in the act, she was chided by her mother superior, the figure in a nunnery equivalent to the abbot in a monastery. Yet despite the reprimands, Nègre could not renounce her passion. Many Bible passages reminded her of dance, and she would hear during Mass the pledge: "I will dance for you, Lord, as long as I live." When invited to serve as cantor, she declined because of being "exasperated

at not being able to pray for God by dancing for him." For Nègre, the leaps of ballet became degrees of rapture that could lead to union with the divine through love.

Her reminiscences make no attempt to conceal the painful sacrifices in forgoing dance. She establishes an equivalence between physical and verbal expression that recalls the tumbler. During her remaining seven years within the religious society, Nègre endured nervous breakdowns, bouts of anorexia, and the onset of a triple scoliosis. Eventually, she left the Carmelites for the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary in Vouvant. There she aspired to broaden the concept of spiritual self-consecration to Christ so as to comprehend the dedication to Him of her body as a dancer. For her, God was the lord of the dance, and dancing could conform to Christianity by enabling ascetic discipline and joyous ecstasy.

Eventually Nègre won over the Church authorities to her viewpoint. She was permitted by the Carmelites to resume dancing. In 1986 she became consecrated as a sister. Since then, she has danced in hallowed places, such as chapels and churches, and has choreographed the words of the liturgy. This experiment in matching the verbal with the corporeal parallels the performance of the tumbler in the medieval French poem, who made his leaps correspond to the offices performed in the choir above him. Just as the lay brother, knowing neither Latin nor monastic sign language, expressed himself through his tumbling, so too this Frenchwoman translated ballet into verbal terms and vice versa.

To what extent has Nègre's self-presentation been shaped by somehow knowing the tradition that originated in "Our Lady's Tumbler"? In her guise of "the protector of dancers," she presents herself as being "like the jongleur on the façade of Notre-Dame of Paris, who used to represent for me the struggle of an artist who finds no recognition in the world." This simile, which points to sculpture rather than literature and to a non-existent carving, suggests an indirect acquaintance with the story and not even through Anatole France. Yes, it would be hard to believe that a professional dancer of her vintage in France would not at some point have been told the tale or have heard of it. But it would be even more unbelievable that anyone would set out to relive a story by entering a nunnery for a decade. Both the story of the tumbler and the biography of Nègre speak to clashing and yet compatible loves that have fired many artists. Can dance and devotion go together? More to the point, can the Catholic religion allow prayer outside liturgy? The crux for this ballerina was her creed "I dance for God."

E. Nick Weber

The fifth is Nick Weber. After becoming a clown, he was ordained a Jesuit priest. A while later, he saw a production of a medieval morality play that had been reconceived for a twentieth-century public. The experience inspired him to make a circus troupe the vehicle for conveying Christian messages to audiences. His Royal Lichtenstein Circus traveled the United States for twenty-two years, from the summer of 1971 through 1993.

In a manner that loosely paralleled that of the Italian performer Dario Fo (recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature), Weber sought to make Christian faith compatible with sacred comedy. His clowning rested on two convictions—that comedy allows for the boisterous celebration of life and that laughter offers an additional avenue for the expression of worship. But Weber ended up believing that his last laugh could not and would not come within the Church. Eventually he left his order.

F. Sister Anna Nobili

The final and most recent example of a real-life individual who prays and worships through dance is Sister Anna Nobili, born in Milan in 1970. This Italian woman left behind work as the equivalent of an exotic dancer to become instead a nun, but without abandoning dance itself. Like most of her predecessors, her choice has generated both fascination and unease within the Catholic Church. Her tale has been reported in newspapers and magazines, retold in on-screen interviews, and set forth in a tell-all memoir with a title translatable as *I Dance with God: The Sister Who Prays Dancing*. The blurb on the cover of the paperback concludes by referring to her “true and mysterious acrobatics of the heart and soul.”

After receiving training in modern, jazz, and classical dance, Nobili, in her early twenties, plied her trade for a time on raised platforms in bars, nightclubs, and discotheques of Milan. Though really a go-go dancer, she has been described often in the media as a lap dancer and stripper. In 1993, she left the dance floor and went on a short visit to Assisi. During those three days, she had a spiritual awakening thanks to Saints Francis and Chiara, and entered the order of Worker-Sisters of the Holy House of Nazareth. In 2008, she obtained permission to open a school for contemporary sacred dance. She now runs Holy Dance in Palestrina, near Rome.

Despite considering herself a ballerina for God, she has been found ungodly by some. As Sister Anna Nobili, her participation in a public event at the Cistercian monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, along with other celebrities such as the pop star Madonna, played a contributing role in a scandal in May of 2011. Undeterred, Sister Anna has appeared frequently on the small screen, written a book, and, above all, danced and taught dance. She contends consistently that she has been driven from the beginning by a desire for love, but that it took her a long time to find that the truest love was love for God.

