


First step for Toronto 'saint'

Thousands pack church as archdiocese launches Vatican-sanctioned inquiry into nun's life

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Friends and followers of the late Sister Carmelina Tarantino gathered by the thousands yesterday at the St. Paschal Baylon Parish in north Toronto to witness an historic first step on the long and uncertain path to sainthood.



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

A parishioner touches a portrait of Sister Carmelina Tarantino March 21, 2009 at St. Paschal Baylon Parish in north Toronto. The nun died in 1992 at age 55.

Acting with permission from the Vatican, the Archdiocese of Toronto launched an inquiry into the "holy" and "compassionate" life of Sister Carmelina, who gave spiritual counsel to many hundreds over the years despite living with disease and pain for more than two decades from a hospital bed in Riverdale.

She died in 1992 at the age of 55, but her guidance and generosity continue to inspire. "This is indeed a most important moment in the history of the Toronto Archdiocese," Archbishop Thomas Collins told a captive, mostly Italian, audience of both young and old.

It was standing room only during the 90-minute mass.

Turning to the church's richly coloured stained glass windows, Collins described in simple terms what it means to be a saint. "A saint is someone the light shines through," he said.







It was so packed that Nina Mosto, 42, had to stand in the front entrance with her three children, husband and mother. She had visited Sister Carmelina nearly 30 years ago to seek her advice, and was compelled yesterday to come with her family. "I wanted them to be a part of this," she said.

The three-step process that leads to sainthood is called canonization. It begins in the community of the subject amid "the voice of the people," explained the archbishop, who went on to introduce a seven-person tribunal made up of priests, archivists and academics. Deacon Joe DiGrado, who knew Sister Carmelina, will lead the committee.


They will spend the next few years gathering evidence of Sister Carmelina's "heroic level of virtue" before reporting their findings back to Rome. The Pope then decides if Sister Carmelina can hold the title "venerable."

After the first stage is passed, the next step is to determine whether a prayer from the nun on someone else's behalf resulted in a miracle. If a miracle can be authenticated she is given the titled "blessed."

Joanne Maio, 55, who met the nun in 1978, said she's living proof of such a miracle. In fact, a letter she wrote that year is expected to be part of the tribunal's evidence.

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Speaking outside St. Paschal Baylon she recalls the day she first visited the nun in hospital along with her husband and baby. Maio had been suffering for five years with a rare skin disorder that caused painful sores around her mouth.

"She prayed over me, over us, and held my baby."

She also prayed over Maio's face. "Days went by and all of a sudden my face started to clear up. It was only much later that I put two and two together," she said.

To pass the final stage – to reach sainthood – a second miracle must be authenticated. This miracle, however, must happen only after Sister Carmelina has been designated "blessed." For example, someone with cancer might pray to her asking to be healed.