

Toronto nun considered for sainthood

Charles Lewis, National Post

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Handout

Sister Carmelina Tarantino, an Italian immigrant who died in 1992 at the age of 55, spent 24 years of her life in a hospital bed in terrible pain. However, "instead of people taking care of her, she ...

On Saturday at St. Paschal Baylon Church in Toronto, 2,000 people will pray to the heavens that an old friend will get to take her place among the pantheon of Catholics long departed.

If those who are behind the cause of Sister Carmelina Tarantino, an Italian immigrant who died in 1992 at the age of 55, are successful, she will become the first saint ever from the city.

Sister Carmelina, whose funeral service was held in the same church in 1992, spent 24 years of her life in a hospital bed in terrible pain. But instead of falling into despair, those who knew her well said she found grace in her agony and spent her life as an advisor and spiritual guide for thousands of people.

"She was touched by God and she responded," said Deacon Joe DiGrado, who knew Sister Carmelina and who will be part of the committee of theologians and historians who will investigate her cause.

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"I was shocked when I first met her. She had a bed sheet that had to be elevated because of the pain. But she had that calmness and gentleness. I remember my first time there I sat next to her bed and I couldn't say a word. How could this woman do this? How could this woman live in this type of situation? No one wants to suffer, no one wants to accept they're not well. But instead of being miserable she found faith."

Sister Christine Minicucci, a member of the same Passionist order as Sr. Carmelina, said that her friend's concern for others was nothing short of holy.

"Instead of people taking care of her she took care of people. When you approach a person who has been sick in bed for many years you would think it would be the other way around," she said. "I saw her unceasing strength in talking to people. And that strength did not come from her, it was from God."

Both say it was not unusual to see lineups outside her hospital door. When she was not counselling in person, she would work the phones -- making sure those who had come to her did not feel they were abandoned.

"It was her ministry," said Mr. DiGrado.

Sr. Carmelina was born in Italy in 1937. She was the eighth of 11 siblings, most of whom emigrated to Canada. In 1962 her brother Tony Tarantino went back home because Carmelina was suffering from painful ailments that no one could diagnose.

Mr. Tarantino said a decision was made to bring her to Canada but doctors here were also stymied. But eventually deadly cysts developed and doctors were forced to amputate her leg and hip. She also eventually had a mastectomy. Before long the Riverdale Hospital became her permanent home.

He said he was too close to her to know if she was a saint.

"She was my sister and she will always be my sister. But when I needed help she always prayed for me and as far as I'm concerned her prayers never got lost."

Once at Riverdale, word began to spread through the Italian community about this great woman who dispensed common sense advice.

"Her advice was not religious," said Sr. Christine. "It was more practical and about the importance of the family. If a woman complained about her husband she always made sure to also see the husband and get his side of the story. And she also would say, I'll pray for you."

Sr. Carmelina made the decision to become a nun while in hospital. Her illness was a huge barrier because women are supposed to be healthy before entering an order. But eventually with the permission of the Vatican she was allowed to proceed. Once she became a nun, her fame grew even more.

Thousands turned out for her funeral and it was those same people who immediately began to petition the Church that Sr. Carmelina be considered for sainthood.

Last year, the Vatican gave permission for the proceeding to go ahead. Saturday, at St. Paschal Baylon, a mandate will be given to Mr. DiGrado and several theologians and

historians, to do the difficult work of determining whether Sr. Carmelina was truly a saint.

If the process is successful, if she is seen to have led a heroic Christian life, she will be called "venerable." If one miracle can be substantiated, she will be called "blessed." And with two miracles, she will be canonized as a saint. Many never make it to venerable.

Fr. Jacques Monet, a Canadian Church historian who has worked on the cause for Georges and Pauline Vanier, said it is important the Church keep making saints.

"It's not just an honour. It's not the main motive. The main reason is that they are an example of practising Christian virtue. Therefore because they practiced in an exemplary way they will be good examples for those of us here. They can be intercessors in heaven so they can pray for us and we can pray to them. They can pray for us to live our own lives with Christian virtue."

THE ROAD TO SAINTHOOD

The process to become a saint can take decades. The key to the process is determining whether the intercession of the departed was responsible for a miracle that cannot be explained by medicine. "People will start praying to someone they knew in this life, believing that now that they are in heaven they can continue to help," said Fr. Jacques Monet, a Canadian Church historian. He said it takes close investigation of medical records and interviews to determine whether something can be called a miracle.

The steps to sainthood are:

Once the cause is allowed to go ahead by the Vatican, the candidate is called a "servant of God." Sr. Carmelina and other Canadians now hold that status. Then three steps must be carried out.

1. After study by the committee, a person declared "venerable" for having lived a life of heroic virtues or martyrdom.
2. Once a miracle is established the candidate is beatified and then is given the title "blessed."
3. To be canonized, and be called a saint, a second miracle must be confirmed.