

Our first Toronto saint?

Locals have high hopes for Sister Carmelina

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By all accounts, Carmelina Tarantino's life was one of suffering – wounds that wouldn't heal, pain that required regular morphine.

She was unwell even as a girl, growing up in a farming family near Pompeii. Then, in 1964, at age 27, she came to Toronto on the urging of her seven brothers and sisters living here. She hoped to get answers about her illnesses, which had

The road to sainthood

The case for sainthood cannot begin until five years after a candidate's death.

The person must first be deemed "venerable" for a life of "heroic virtue."

That is decided by the local diocese and bishops, who then pass it to the Vatican.

If the Pope rules that the person has at least one miracle to their credit, the candidate is "beatified" and is referred to as Blessed. Two miracles are required for sainthood.

Canada has 10 saints: the eight Jesuit Martyrs as well as St. Marguerite Bourgeoys and St. Marguerite d'Youville, both founders of religious orders.

About 24 Canadians are being considered for beatification,



From her bed, Sister Carmelina Tarantino got food to the needy and books to children in poor families.

baffled Italian physicians.

Canadian doctors suspected a rare cancer, but that was

including former Governor-General Georges Vanier and his wife, Pauline.

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never confirmed. To contain the spread of disease, her left leg was amputated to the hip and she had a mastectomy. She could not sit up, and her dressings needed to be changed several times a day. Believing that radiation and chemotherapy were no longer helpful, doctors sent her to Riverdale hospital for her last few months.

Yet Tarantino lived. And with permission from the Vatican, in 1977 she fulfilled a long held wish to become a nun, though she never left her hospital bed. "For 24 years, the same bed, the same room, the same position," says her brother Antonio Tarantino, 78.

If she was cut off from the world, the world was not cut off from her. Word slowly spread of the gravely ill woman at Riverdale (now known as Bridgepoint Health) who helped those who visited her. Despite her continuing pain, she seemed joyful. "She put herself aside and turned to support others," says Sister Christine Minicucci, who met Sister Carmelina in 1978.

She counselled thousands before her death in 1992, at age 55. And because of how she transcended physical suffering to help others, a group of Torontonians have begun the process of getting her made a saint.

It's the first time someone from this city has been nominated for sainthood.

There was something about the frail invalid in the starched habit that drew people. The line-ups in the hall were a nuisance to hospital administrators, who insisted visitors make appointments. Over the years, thousands came – not just the faithful, but people in troubled marriages or struggling with depression or addictions.

"She didn't look at you as an abusive husband or an addict – she saw the good in you," says former hospital chaplain Joseph DiGrado, who knew her for 15 years.

For those who couldn't go to the hospital, she used the phone, sometimes counselling people up to 10 hours a day. Some have suggested that if she does achieve sainthood, Sister Carmelina, who had a Grade 5 education and spoke little English (most who sought her guidance spoke Italian), should be named patron saint of the telephone.

Last month, DiGrado, along with members of Sister Carmelina's religious order, the Congregation of the Passionist Sisters of St. Paul of the Cross, received permission from Thomas Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto, to start gathering evidence of her holiness. It's the beginning of the beatification process, one of the early steps toward sainthood in the Catholic Church.

Now, her supporters are doing the spadework. Her order has obtained 100 testimonials from people whom she helped, and is seeking more. Among her good deeds: getting food delivered to the needy, securing books for children whose parents couldn't afford them, reconciling families that were divided, and, in one case, talking a young man out of suicide. "She organized and mobilized people," says Sister Valeriana Natilla, 84. "She'd say, 'I need to have this delivered.'"

None of her supporters uses the word "miracle," but that's what's needed if Sister Carmelina is to join the ranks of the saints. If anyone who prayed to her has had their prayers dramatically answered – for example, a terminal patient cured or a tumour gone – that would qualify as a miracle under Catholic doctrine.

The phenomenon of the bedridden saint is not unknown in Catholic tradition. Such individuals, using their anguish in a transformative way, are perceived as martyrs, their suffering identified with that of Christ. "Some people," says Sister Christine, "are chosen to offer to God all their suffering for the well being of others.

Because addicts were among those Sister Carmelina helped, it seemed natural that the Passionist sisters would help those struggling with substance abuse. In the community room of the Etobicoke bungalow where Sister Christine and Sister Valeriana live, five young women are watching television, a few of them knitting. They are part of the order's two-year, non-medical residential treatment program.

One of Sister Carmelina's early supporters was Father Claudio Piccinini, a Passionist priest, who helped her to become a nun. "She was in Room 306 West, stretched on her bed, a pillow under her head, immaculately clean," he says, recalling his first visit. "Her hair was long and black, it was loose. She wore glasses and was pale, but she was beautiful, I sat down and it was as if we'd known each other a million years. She said, 'Nothing changes, this is my life.'"

But her life did change. In time, dozens of people visited each day, he says. "Her room became almost like an official confession. People would go there and reveal their souls to her. "She'd say, 'This isn't what the Lord is asking of you – you need to shape up.'"