


# Was ailing nun the first saint in Toronto?

Diocese begins inquiry into bedridden woman 'known for her holiness'

Mar 15, 2009 04:30 AM

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The news came surprisingly quickly from the Vatican, where ecclesiastic decisions usually unfold over years, not days or weeks.

Five months after asking, the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto has permission from Rome to assemble a panel of theologians and historians to delve into the life of Sister Carmelina Tarantino, a plain-spoken nun who spent decades bedridden in hospital, to see if she has sufficient "heroic virtue" to be a candidate for sainthood.

The Archdiocese calls the inquiry "unprecedented and historic" – a first for Toronto. The Vatican has declared her case *nihil obstat* – there is nothing to hinder proceeding to study "her reputation as a woman known for her holiness," Archbishop Thomas Collins wrote in a letter to Toronto priests.

Sister Carmelina may now be called a "Servant of God."

The diocesan examination opens this coming Saturday with a celebratory mass at St. Paschal Baylon church on Steeles Ave. W., which thousands are expected to attend.

Sister Carmelina, who was 55 when she died in 1992, was a "pleasant woman with a pale and suffering face," according to her medical records. Unable to move from her bed at Riverdale Hospital (now called Bridgepoint Health), she began receiving visitors.

Her common-sense advice on spiritual and social matters, dispensed in Italian, drew people to her for counselling. There were often petitioners lined up in the hospital hall waiting to see her.

"The first visit to her was, for me, the beginning of an interior transformation," according to a testimonial by a witness identified as I.S.

All this, while enduring pain.






Sister Carmelina's left leg was amputated during treatment for bone and skin cancers. Her wounds were constantly bleeding, and dressings had to be changed several times a day. Later she underwent a mastectomy.

She was consumed by poor health: pneumonia, tuberculosis, various infections and cataracts, which led to loss of vision in one eye. She underwent 26 surgeries and let it be known that if she were to undergo a 27th, she wanted doctors to operate without anesthesia so she could offer up her pain as a sacrifice.



VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Joseph DiGrado, a retired chaplain, is seeking evidence for the Vatican in the initial steps to beatify a Toronto nun, Sister Carmelina Tarantino.

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She came to Canada to join five of nine siblings already here and hopefully get treatment for her ailments. At the time, she was expected to live only months.

"That was the prognosis from every doctor who operated on her," says Joseph DiGrado, a former hospital chaplain who has been gathering evidence in support of Sister Carmelina's cause. "There really was no hope for her."

In 1977, with permission from the Vatican and without the usual preparatory education required to enter a religious order, she made her vows with the Congregation of the Passionist Sisters of St. Paul of the Cross. Carmelina was the first sister in North America in that order; soon others joined her to form a small community

In the first stage of their inquiry, investigators will examine Sister Carmelina's gifts in guiding people "on the path of faith," says Sister Christine Minicucci of the Passionist order, "how she helped troubled families re-establish themselves by believing in God."

In a small book on Sister Carmelina's life, *On the Cross with a Smile*, Gabriele Cingolani describes her as an immigrant, like many of her visitors in hospital, with "an unrefined but strong faith like theirs." (She was born near Naples to hazelnut farmers and had little education.)

Cingolani writes: "She finds the right words to say because she is an expert in pain ..." adding her words were simple but full of wisdom.

A team of theologians and historians and an archivist will study her life. "They are objective, neither in favour or against," says Sister Christine. "They will judge it by the theology of the church."

DiGrado, retired from St. Joseph's Health Centre, has acquired some 125 testimonials from those who were affected by Sister Carmelina. As the "vice-postulator," he will accumulate evidence to eventually be sent to the Congregation for Causes of Saints in Rome. If the Vatican accepts this evidence, Sister Carmelina may be called Venerable.

For the next stage, beatification, evidence of one miracle is required (for example, proof of a cure by asking for intercession through the candidate). The last stage, canonization, or declaration as a saint, usually requires evidence of a second miracle.

DiGrado says he cannot talk about miracles at this stage. "I don't want to give a false impression ... it could pan out and it could not."

There are no contemporary Canadian saints, and the Catholic Church is eager to provide modern examples of holiness. Canada's saints lived in distant times. For instance, the North American Martyrs (among them the well-known St. Jean de Brébeuf) died in the 1640s and were canonized in 1930.

From diocesan records, it appears Sister Carmelina's is the first canonization case to be opened in the archdiocese for someone who lived in Toronto.