

Bishop Baraga sainthood cause takes major step forward

The cause for sainthood for Bishop Frederic Baraga, first bishop of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, took a giant step forward this spring with an announcement by Bishop Alexander K. Sample of the Catholic Diocese of Marquette, Mich.

"We believe that we have a miracle – a medical miracle – that we can attribute to the intercession of Bishop Baraga," said Bishop Sample.

The case involves what was "thought to be a tumor on a patient's liver that showed up on various tests, including a CT scan and ultrasound," explained Father Ronald Browne, moderator of the curia for the Diocese of Marquette. "However, when exploratory surgery was done, there was no tumor to be found."

The patient, the patient's family and their parish priest had prayed for healing, invoking the intercession of Bishop Baraga. Additionally, Bishop Baraga's stole had been placed on the patient's abdomen, after which the patient reported that the pain had gone away.

The patient's doctor and radiologist said they can offer no explanation for the apparent cure.

An official inquiry to investigate the alleged miracle began on March 12 when members of a canonical tribunal signed documents to open the process. Bishop Sample has appointed Father Browne to lead the work of the tribunal. Other members of the team include Father Ben Paris as promoter of justice, Elizabeth Delene as notary, Judy Jason as copier (transcriptionist) and Dr. John G. Kublin as the medical expert. Father Michael Steber, pastor of St. Peter Cathedral in Marquette, will serve as chancellor to open and close the inquiry process. The members of the tribunal took an oath affirming they would perform their duties as investigators "in the eyes of God."

Father Browne said, "It is presumed (by the Catholic Church) that there is not a miracle" until one is proven. The work of the tribunal is to gather documentation and testimony of the purported miracle to present to the postulator for the Baraga cause for sainthood, Andrea Ambrosi, who will travel to the Diocese of Marquette in July. He will take the reports back to Rome for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to weigh the evidence and determine if a miracle did indeed occur.

To be officially declared a saint by the church, a candidate for sainthood must clear three hurdles. Firstly, a rigorous investigation into the candidate's life, virtues and writings must determine he or she demonstrates heroic virtues or suffered martyrdom. When the candidate's heroic virtue or martyrdom has been officially recognized by the pope, the person may then be called "venerable."

In the second step of the process, a miracle attributable to the intercession of the person whose sainthood is being sought must be proven, after which he or she is officially bestowed the title of "Blessed." And finally, to be officially declared a saint by the church, a second miracle must be proven, which can be attributed to the blessed candidate's intercession following his beatification.

While the cause for sainthood for Bishop Baraga was



initiated in the 1930s, when the Bishop Baraga Association was established to promote the cause for sainthood of the "Snowshoe Priest," the alleged miracle has spurred new interest in Rome.

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints will again review the *positio* (a comprehensive summary of the candidate's life, virtues and writings by and about him) and make a recommendation to Pope Benedict XVI regarding Bishop Baraga's heroic virtue. The Holy Father will then decide whether the title of "Venerable" can be conferred on Bishop Baraga.

Born in Slovenia in 1797, Bishop Baraga came to the United States as a missionary to the Odawa and Ojibwa people of the upper Great Lakes region in 1830. He traveled throughout the 80,000 square-mile territory by canoe, horse, snowshoe and even dog sled.

In 1833, then Father Baraga established the beginnings of Saint Andrew Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., when he built the first church, St. Mary's Mission, amid Indian cornfields on the west bank of the Grand River.

At about the same time, he chose a site which the Catholic Odawa wished to have as their center for prayer "on an elevation, offering a beautiful view of the lake and the Maschigong river." The bluff is thought to be Pigeon Hill in present-day Muskegon, overlooking Muskegon Lake.

He was consecrated a bishop and appointed vicar apostolic of the Upper Peninsula in 1853. When the vicariate apostolic was established as the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie (now called the Diocese of Marquette) in 1857, Baraga served as its first bishop until his death in 1868. His work includes an Ojibwa-English dictionary, which is still in use today.

Story courtesy of John Fee, Catholic Diocese of Marquette, Mich.

Contributions from *Where the Star Came to Rest: The stories of the Catholic people of West Michigan*, by Rev. Msgr. Gaspar F. Ancona.