

Serra Sainthood Cause Moves Forward

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Father Junipero Serra, who founded a string of Franciscan missions from San Diego to San Francisco, has moved slightly closer to sainthood, a Vatican official said Tuesday.

A medical subcommittee appointed by the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation for the Causes of Saints has found that the healing of an American nun who prayed for Serra's intercession more than 25 years ago cannot be explained scientifically, according to Msgr. Robert Sarno, an American priest assigned to the congregation.

The Vatican action keeps alive the possibility that Serra will be beatified in September, when Pope John Paul II visits California.

Beatification would elevate Serra to the second of three steps to sainthood. Serra was named "venerable," the first of the steps, in 1985. In order for Serra to move from venerable to beatified, the congregation must find that at least one miracle was performed as a result of his intercession, although the Pope can dispense with this requirement. The final step, canonization, usually takes place in Rome, and it requires documentation of a second miracle.

There has been some concern among Serra supporters and those planning the Pope's American tour that time is running short in the event that it is necessary to juggle the pontiff's schedule to arrange a beatification Mass at the Laguna Seca Raceway near Monterey on Sept. 17, not far from the Carmel Mission, which Serra founded and where he was buried.

"We're on a tight schedule, there's no doubt about it," Sarno said in a telephone interview from Rome. "Our goal is sincerely to have this project finished by the time the Pope comes to the United States."

A panel of five physicians will consider the case of Sister Boniface Dryda late this month, Sarno said. Sister Boniface traveled to Rome last December to be examined by physicians appointed by the congregation. If a majority of that panel confirms that there is no scientific explanation for the nun's remission from a serious case of lupus, Serra's "cause," as it is known, will be passed to a group of nine theologians who will decide if the remission was miraculous. (Lupus is an inflammatory disease affecting many systems of the body.)

The theologians will vote, around mid-July, on whether to recommend to the full congregation that Serra's beatification be approved and forwarded to the Pope. The full congregation will probably consider the matter by mid-August, Sarno said.

Although Sarno said he is "optimistic," he said the outcome of this process is by no means certain.

"The human process of deciding the merits of the cause can be sped up, but the merits of the cause are either there or not," he said. "We don't approve a cause because the Pope is going there," Sarno said.

A negative vote on Serra by any of the bodies would probably not kill Serra's chances for sainthood, but it would make beatification in September highly unlikely, Sarno said.

Before the subcommittee's recommendation, said Father Noel Francis Moholy, a Franciscan priest who is Serra's vice postulator, or chief supporter, said he had been "in the dumps" because it was "getting near the deadline" for hearing any favorable news. Now, he said in a telephone interview from San Francisco, "it appears we're coming in right under the wire."

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