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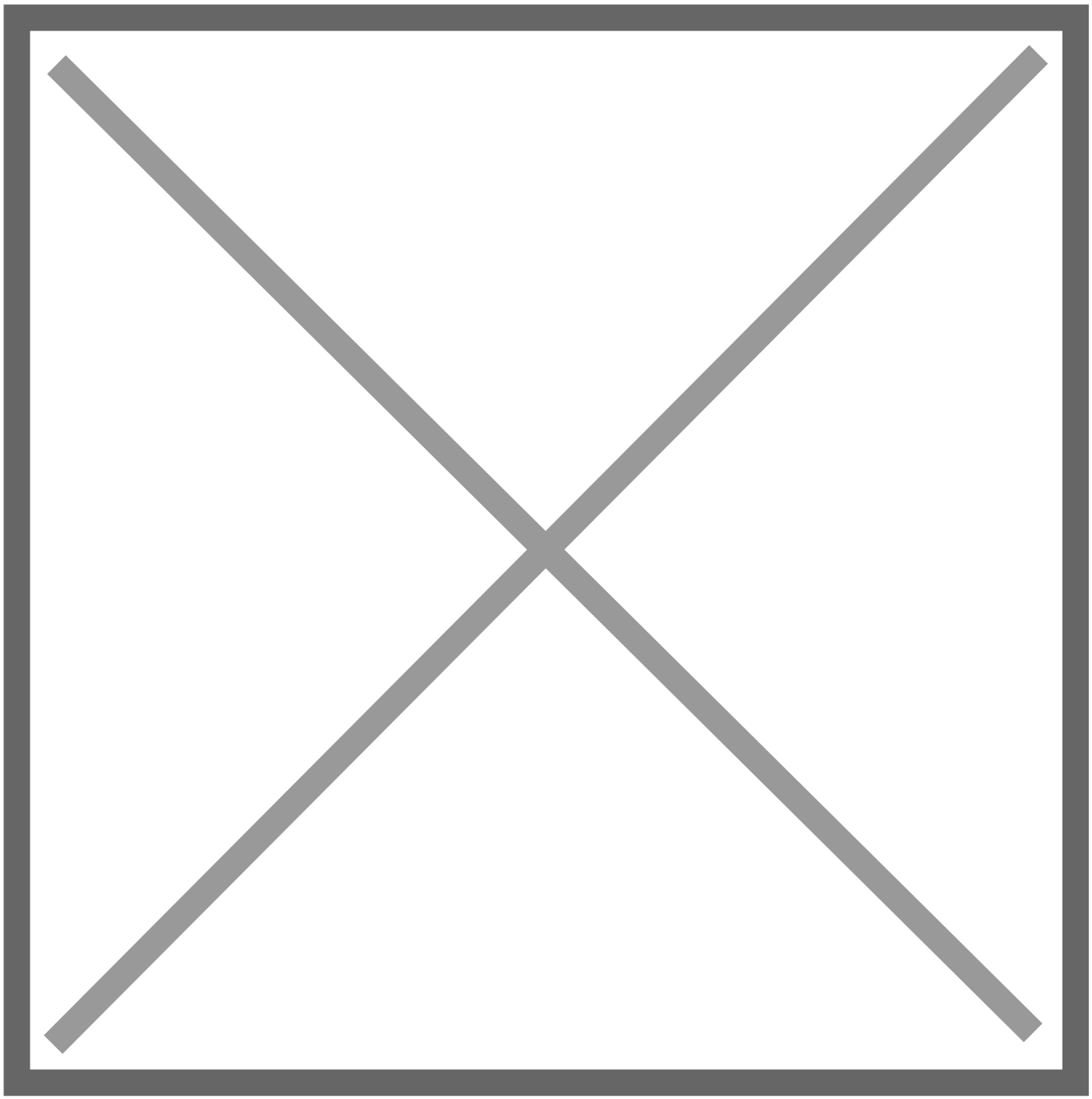

Fr. Edward Flanagan, the Irish-born priest who founded Boys Town in Nebraska, talks with a group of boys in this undated photo. Pope Leo XIV declared Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town, venerable in recognition of his heroic virtue March 23, 2026. (OSV News/Courtesy of Boys Town)

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Pope Leo XIV declared Fr. Edward Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town, venerable on March 23, recognizing his heroic virtue and moving him one step closer to sainthood.

The pope signed the decree during an audience with Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

The declaration grants Flanagan the title "Venerable" and now requires two approved miracles, one for beatification and one for canonization, before his cause can advance further.

Flanagan, who was born in County Roscommon, Ireland, in 1886 and emigrated to the United States at age 18, is best known for founding Boys Town, a home for orphaned and at-risk youth on the outskirts of Omaha, Nebraska.

"Fr. Flanagan made such an impression on the hearts of people, Catholic and non-Catholic, that people still speak of him with pride and a sense of reverence, even," Archbishop Michael McGovern, who was installed in Omaha in May 2025, told OSV News March 23.

"I was always impressed by his courage," McGovern added. "He faced a lot of opposition and yet he kept going forward and really believed in what he was doing, and that made all the difference in the world for these youth, and so we're very, very proud that his legacy continues. I hope that people get to know him better."

Flanagan started with a rented house and five boys on Dec. 12, 1917, driven by the conviction that every child deserved care, education, and love.

"There are no bad boys. There is only bad environment, bad training, bad example, bad thinking," Flanagan once said.

What began as a small home grew into a self-governing community west of Omaha, incorporated as a municipality in 1934. Boys Town today includes a campus of group homes, a grade school and high school, a post office and bank, a national research hospital, and a national hotline for children in crisis.

Flanagan became widely known to American audiences after actor Spencer Tracy portrayed him in the 1938 film "Boys Town." His reputation extended far beyond Nebraska; following World War II, Gen. Douglas MacArthur invited him to visit Japan and Korea to advise on improving conditions for children in occupied territories.

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He later traveled to Austria and Germany on a similar mission, and in 1946 he publicly condemned the treatment of children in Irish industrial schools and reformatories, a critique that a 2009 Irish government report would later vindicate.

Flanagan died of a heart attack on May 15, 1948, in Berlin, at age 61, while on a government-sponsored mission to assess child welfare conditions in occupied Germany. His body was repatriated and about 30,000 people paid their respects in the two days before his burial.

"The work will continue, you see, whether I am there or not, because it is God's work, not mine," Flanagan said.

His cause for sainthood was formally opened in 2012. Documentation of his life and ministry was submitted to the Vatican in 2015, and a detailed account of his virtues was presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 2019.

In the same decree, Leo also recognized the "offering of life" of Italian Cardinal Ludovico Altieri, bishop of Albano, who died in 1867, and declared four others venerable.

— Fr. Henri Caffarel, a French diocesan priest born in Lyon in 1903, was among those declared venerable. He founded the "Teams of Our Lady" in Paris in the late 1930s, a Catholic lay movement centered on married spirituality that brings together Christian couples seeking to deepen the graces of the Sacrament of Marriage. Now active in 75 countries, the movement grew out of informal monthly gatherings Caffarel held with married couples in a Paris parish. He died in Beauvais in 1996.

— Giuseppe Castagnetti was an Italian layman, father of 12 children and politician from Modena who served as mayor of Prignano sulla Secchia from 1945 to 1959. He became widely known for his austere spiritual life and his close relationship with Padre Pio, who served as his spiritual director and before whom he pledged to wear sandals for the rest of his life. Castagnetti later joined Catholic Action and the Third Order of St. Francis. He died in 1965 and was praised for his expression of Christian virtue in ordinary life.

— Sr. Stanislawa Samulowska, born Barbara Samulowska in present-day Poland in 1865, entered the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and devoted nearly her entire religious life to missionary work in Guatemala, where she served for 54 years until her death in Guatemala City in 1950.

— Sr. María of Bethlehem of the Heart of Jesus Romero Algarín, born María Dolores in Seville, Spain, in 1916, was a professed religious of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Divine Heart. She died in Sanlúcar la Mayor in 1977.