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Path to sainthood cleared for sister who worked with lepers

by Tom Gallagher



Blessed Marianne Cope (blessedmariannecope.org)

The Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints unanimously confirmed Tuesday that a second miracle was due to the intercession of Blessed Marianne Cope, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities in Syracuse, N.Y., according to a press release from the religious community.

"We are very excited," said Sr. Grace Ann Dillenschneider, Vice Postulator for the Cause for the Diocese of Syracuse. "The sisters have been waiting for this for a very long time. She was an ordinary woman who did extraordinary things."

Details about the second miracle will become available closer to canonization, Dillenschneider said.

Cope, formerly Barbara Koob (now Cope), was born in Heppenheim, Germany, in 1838. Her family immigrated to the United States in 1839 and settled in Utica, N.Y.

Her entrance into religious life was postponed for nine years so she could work and support her family after her father became disabled. One month after his death in 1862, Cope entered the Sisters of St. Francis.

Cope was a teacher and principal in several schools in upstate New York. Teaching led to a series of administrative appointments. In the late 1860s, she was instrumental in establishing the first two hospitals in central New York, St. Elizabeth's in Utica and St. Joseph's in Syracuse. These two hospitals were among the first 50 hospitals in the entire United States.

"Blessed Marianne had an advance understanding of health care and is a model for women today," Dillenschneider said.

According to her biography, no challenge ever seemed too much for Cope. She possessed the intelligence and charisma of a facilitator and the energies of a woman motivated by God alone.

Cope was an innovator. Long before the importance of cleanliness in caring for the sick was scientifically known, Cope insisted on practices such as washing one's hands before ministering to the patients. She also was an advocate for patients' rights.

In 1883, Cope's devotion to the sick and the poor took an important turn. She responded to an invitation to provide health care services on the Hawaiian Islands, especially to patients with Hansens' disease, or leprosy.

Cope traveled to Hawaii with six sisters and expected to stay a short time and return to Syracuse. Instead, she set up a new hospital, took over the administration of another and created a home for homeless children of leprosy patients, among many initiatives. She was decorated by King David Kalakaua with the medal of the Royal Order of Kapiolani for acts of benevolence that helped suffering people in Hawaii.



In 1884, Cope met St. Damien de Veuster, the apostle of lepers, at a

dedication of a new hospital she would later lead. Cope would give hospitality to Damien later in life, when he suffered from leprosy, and would bring to fruition many programs he envisioned.

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Cope spent 30 years in Hawaii ministering to patients. She died of natural causes in 1918 and was beatified in 2005. The final step to canonization is Pope Benedict XVI's approval and setting a date for the ceremony.

The exciting news from the Vatican comes at a bittersweet time for this religious community. Sr. Mary Lawrence Hanley, who worked on the cause of canonization since the mid-1970s, died Dec. 2, before the announcement.

"I am sure that Sister Mary Lawrence is happily watching from heaven," Dillenschneider said. Hanley had only been sick for a month.

"She said to me, 'My work is done and Mother Marianne is going to be a saint,'" Dillenschneider said.

"We are delighted that the cause for Blessed Marianne Cope is moving forward," said Syracuse diocese Bishop Robert Cunningham. "She means much to many people here in our diocese. We are eager to learn of the Holy Father's approval and establishment of a date for canonization."

"This is wonderful news about a great woman who labored so lovingly and effectively for those no one wanted to even go near," said Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association.

"She was a humble but wonderful servant who did so much to alleviate the suffering of a dreaded and miserable disease. When health workers stayed away for fear of contagion and because the patients were so difficult to look at and care for, she gave them the love of God in tender and excellent care," Keehan said.

"I look forward to the day the church proclaims this great daughter of the church a saint," Keehan said.

More:

- Learn more about Blessed Marianne Cope
- Learn more about the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities

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