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Sainthood could be many years away

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In life, she was often called a "living saint" because of her evident faith and her service to the poor.

In death, however, Mother Teresa will have to wait for the title of sainthood. The earliest church officials can begin looking at her cause is Sept. 5, 2002 — exactly five years after she died in Calcutta.

After that, more time will pass as church authorities examine her writings, hear witnesses and investigate alleged miracles.

For the church, there are no "instant saints," and there are good reasons for that, say Vatican officials.

The waiting period was first instituted in the 16th century as part of new Vatican sainthood rules. Once 30 years long and today only five, this procedural pause has always been an important element in discerning who's a saint and who isn't.

For one thing, Vatican officials say, it allows time for a popular cult to develop. In the church's eyes, one clear sign of sainthood is that people pray to the person in the years following his or her death.

In other words, it's not enough to be a "living saint"; the person's holiness must keep working after departure from this life.

The church also sees the waiting period as a time when God can confirm popular opinion about a would-be saint, through the granting of graces, favors and miracles in response to prayers.

In this sense, canonization — the decla-

ration of sainthood — would represent not so much a "posthumous medal" for Mother Teresa as a recognition that God has raised her up as a model for the faithful, in a process that continues.

Certainly, Mother Teresa has a head start on the official road to sainthood. One of the major criteria used by church authorities is whether the person had a reputation for sanctity; that box has already been checked for Mother Teresa.

Investigations of what she wrote and said publicly should not present much of a problem, either. Authorities would look for any statement against faith and morals, not for depth of theological argument.

When discerning sainthood, church officials also look for a special charisma that distinguishes the person, through which God is seen as sending a message to the world.

Again, it seems obvious in Mother Teresa's case: her deep love for the poor and downtrodden.

The local investigation into the cause normally begins in the diocese where the person died. In this case it would fall to the Archdiocese of Calcutta, where Mother Teresa worked so many years with the dying and destitute.

Her religious order, the Missionaries of Charity, would be a natural promoter of the cause, helping to find witnesses and documentation so that a detailed life record can be compiled.

After a local church has collected the information, it is sent to the Vatican's Con-

gregation for Sainthood Causes. There, the material is assembled into a "position" that can be thousands of pages long.

If the Vatican finds that Christian virtues were lived out in a heroic manner worthy of imitation, it declares the person venerable. The next procedural step is beatification, which — except in the case of martyrs — requires a canonically approved miracle attributed to the person's intercession. This is where many sainthood causes linger for decades or centuries.

For canonization, another miracle must be proven to have taken place after beatification. Final approval of sainthood comes from the pope.



Teresa

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be remembered for her commitment to the poor.

"Words fail me to express my sorrow," said Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, calling the Nobel laureate "an apostle of peace and love."

Even after health problems led Mother Teresa to resign as head of the Missionaries of Charity in 1990, her order re-elected her as superior, and she continued traveling at a pace that would have tired people half her age. It was not until March 12 of this year, after health problems that recurred more frequently, that the Missionaries of Charity elected her successor.

Despite calls on her time from all over the globe to found new convents, speak at international gatherings or receive some new honor for her work, she always returned to India to be with those she loved most — the lonely, abandoned, homeless, disease-ravaged, dying, "poorest of the poor" in Calcutta's streets.

When Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, Dec. 10, 1979, she accepted it "in the name of the hungry, of the naked, of the homeless, of the blind, of the lepers, of all those who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society."

In her acceptance speech, she condemned abortion as the world's greatest destroyer of people.

"To me, the nations who have legalized

abortion are the poorest nations," she said. "They are afraid of the unborn child, and the child must die."

In recent years, her health began deteriorating. In 1996 she had four hospitalizations: for a broken collarbone; for a head injury from a fall; for cardiac problems, malaria and a lung infection; and for angioplasty to remove blockages in two of her major arteries.

But Mother Teresa bounced back, traveling to Rome and the United States last spring.

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Ganxhe Bojaxhiu to Albanian parents in Skopje, in what is now the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, on Aug. 26, 1910.

While teaching and serving as a principal at Loreto House, a fashionable girls' college in Calcutta, she was depressed by the destitute and dying on the city's streets, the homeless street urchins, the ostracized sick people lying prey to rats and other vermin in streets and alleys.

In 1946, she received a "call within a call," as she described it.

"The message was clear. I was to leave the convent and help the poor, while living among them," she said.

Two years later, the Vatican gave her permission to leave the Loreto Sisters and follow her new calling under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Calcutta.

In 1950 the Missionaries of Charity became a diocesan religious community, and 15 years later the Vatican recognized it as a pontifical congregation, directly under Vatican jurisdiction.

Churches plan memorial activities

As of deadline, the *Catholic Courier* had learned of several efforts to honor the memory of Mother Teresa.

The InterFaith Forum of Greater Rochester has scheduled a memorial service for Mother Teresa for 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 14, at Asbury First United Methodist Church, 1050 East Ave.

At Apalachin's St. Margaret Mary Church, Mother Teresa will be recalled at the parish's regularly scheduled nocturnal adoration this weekend. The adoration begins at 7 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 13, and concludes at 8 a.m. Sunday,

Sept. 14. Mother Teresa will be prayed for every hour, on the hour.

St. Patrick's Church in Seneca Falls has condolence books on display for both Mother Teresa and Princess Diana, who died Aug. 30.

The books will be available in front of the church's baptismal font for people to sign anytime the church is open, until at least early the week of Sept. 15. Then, the book for Mother Teresa will be mailed to Calcutta; the book for Princess Diana will be sent to her sons, Princes William and Harry, in London.

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