

Late Rev. Guanella to be named a saint

Thursday, October 6, 2011

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For the second time in a decade, the unexplained healing of a Delaware County resident has led to qualifying a Roman Catholic religious figure for sainthood.

William Glisson Jr.'s recovery from potentially fatal head trauma suffered in a roller-blading accident on Baltimore Pike in Springfield on March 15, 2002, has been deemed by Vatican officials as the final miracle needed to canonize the Rev. Louis Guanella. The namesake for the Don Guanella Village for developmentally disabled men and boys in Marple will be canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome on Oct. 23.

"It's just amazing to even be a part of it," said Glisson, who will be attending the canonization with his wife, Kaye, and about two dozen other family members and friends.

Also witnessing Guanella's elevation to sainthood will be the Rev. Dennis Weber, superior for the Servants of Charity in Delaware County. He was among those who prayed to Guanella for Glisson's recovery more than nine years ago.

"There's special pride that the miracle happened here in Delaware County, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia," said Weber. "It gives us a chance to be able to spread the word about Don Guanella, who died in 1915, but is still relevant for our time."

Born in Fraciscio, Italy, on Dec. 19, 1842, Louis Guanella was ordained a priest in Como on May 26, 1866. A champion of the poor and disabled, he founded the Servants of Charity Congregation of priests and brothers and the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence sisters. In 1960, Don Guanella School, which in 1976 expanded to include the residential Cardinal Krol Center, was opened in Marple for developmentally disabled boys and men. A similar facility for girls, Divine Providence Village, was opened in Marple in 1984.

Weber, who has served in some capacity at what is now known as Don Guanella Village since 1989, became aware of Glisson's severe injury in 2002 from former staffer Noreen Yoder, now director of the Widener University Child Development Center in Chester. She is a friend of Glisson's parents, Donna and William Glisson Sr.

Yoder told the Don Guanella community about how the then-21-year-old Glisson flipped backward when he hit a curb while roller-blading and suffered a severe head injury that

his neurologist expected to end in permanent disability or death. The priests, students, residents and staff members at Don Guanella began praying to the Italian cleric, who had been beatified in 1964 after being credited with two other miracles, for the recovery of Glisson, who was comatose and on a respirator.

“What’s even more powerful is that we pray the rosary each day at the Cardinal Krol Center and he was our special intention,” said Weber.

While Glisson was in a coma, he wore a relic of Guanella, as did his mother. He has no memory of his accident between looking at his friend, John Raniero, while roller-blading backward and waking up in a hospital several weeks later.

“One number that was thrown around was a 20 percent survival rate. I guess I was in that 20 percent. I was handed a gift,” said the 30-year-old Middletown resident.

Nineteen days after undergoing two emergency surgeries to relieve pressure and hemorrhaging on his brain, Glisson was able to respond to simple commands, according to an Oct. 30, 2006, letter written by neurosurgeon Dr. Raymond M. Joson to the Rev. Peter DiTullio, the vice postulator who advocated for Guanella’s sainthood.

“It is my opinion based on over 35 years experience in the field of neurological surgery that William Glisson has sustained a devastating brain injury and, according to the evidence, made a rapid recovery with no signs of motor or cognitive disabilities,” wrote Joson.

“It is also my opinion that such a recovery was not only remarkable, but miraculous since I cannot attribute this recovery to any specific neurosurgical or medical treatment he received,” added the neurosurgeon.

The Pontifical Theological Commission confirmed that Glisson’s healing was obtained through the intercession of Blessed Father Louis Guanella in January 2010. Glisson is now working in the family business, M and J Supply of Folcroft, as he was before his near-fatal accident.

“I drive a truck, I help make windows, I make deliveries. I do a little bit of everything,” said Glisson.

On March 25, 1992, 14-year-old Bernadette McKenzie of the Drexel Hill section of Upper Darby was miraculously relieved of crippling spinal pain in the midst of a novena to Leonie Aviat at St. Bernadette Parish, enabling the founder of the Oblates Sister of Francis de Sales to be canonized on Nov. 25, 2001.