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A John Paul II miracle cure? Maybe, maybe not.

Laura Johnston Religion News Service | Apr. 5, 2009

CLEVELAND -- It makes a great story.

Jory Aebly's miraculous recovery from an execution-style gunshot to the head bolsters Pope John Paul II's case for sainthood.

Except that four years after the legendary pope died at age 84, the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints hasn't said that he will be beatified any time soon.

Local Catholic officials say they didn't know about the miracle claim. And the chaplain who prayed to John Paul to heal Aebly hasn't said whether he's even submitting the potential miracle for investigation.

"Even with John Paul II, the Vatican is going to be very careful, especially in the case of miracles. ... It's very easy to leave yourself open to the charge of superstition if you too readily claim that instance is a miracle," said Paul V. Murphy, director of the Institute of Catholic Studies at John Carroll University. "There are people all over the world sending stories like this to the Vatican."

In February, when Aebly was shot in the head and doctors at MetroHealth Medical Center believed he would die.

The Rev. Art Snedeker, the chaplain at the hospital, gave Aebly the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, part of the traditional last rites. He asked Pope John Paul II to pray for and protect Aebly.

Aebly's friend Jeremy Pechanec, who was shot at the same time, died. But on Tuesday (March 31), Aebly, 26, was released from the hospital, able to climb stairs and manage most tasks of daily life.

"In my mind, Jory is a miracle," Snedeker said at the news conference announcing Aebly's discharge.

The declaration -- from a priest, no less -- spurred speculation of sainthood for the late pope, mainly from a local television station. It was then picked up by ABC's "Good Morning America."

In a memorial Mass Thursday to mark the four-year anniversary of John Paul's death, Pope Benedict XVI prayed for his predecessor's beatification, the first step to sainthood. To be beatified, the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints must certify one miracle; for sainthood, two.

In 2007, the congregation began investigating the case of a French nun who says she was cured of Parkinson's disease after praying to John Paul. Although Benedict waived the requirement that five years pass before consideration for sainthood, a Vatican official in charge of the late pontiff's case told an Italian news service he was not on the list of upcoming cases.

"The church doesn't move at the same pace of the media. ... The church moves in centuries," Murphy said, explaining that to be considered a miracle, doctors must not be able to find a scientific explanation for the

recovery.

Snedeker has refused interviews. But at the news conference, he explained what he believed to be the late pope's intercession in Aebly's recovery.

Years ago, when he had a private audience with the pope, John Paul II gave him a dozen rosaries the pontiff had blessed. He promised to pray for MetroHealth patients and instructed Snedeker to give the rosaries to the sick.

Weeks after Aebly entered the hospital, Snedeker gave him the last John Paul II rosary in his possession.

"I truly believe that one of the reasons I'm here today and am able to speak to you is because of the millions of prayers that I've received from family, friends, co-workers, even people that I haven't met," Aebly said at the news conference.

John Paul canonized more saints than any other pope and "saints are really important to the church, not only because of miraculous intercessions," Murphy said. "Fundamentally, they are examples of heroic virtue for other Catholics and Christians."

Since John Paul's death, Cleveland's St. Stanislaus Catholic Church has been praying for John Paul, who said Mass there in 1969, when he was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla.

On the third Thursday of every month, the congregation gathers to pray for the pope, to worship at his shrine and touch an ornate miter he wore. One family believes the pope cured an uncle's prostate cancer.

The family never submitted the miracle to the Vatican, said the Rev. Michael Surufka, the pastor. He's also heard the news of Aebly's miracle recovery.

"I hope to see John Paul canonized," Surufka said. "However this man was healed, he's healed. That's a beautiful thing. Whether that was attributed to John Paul, that's up to them to decide."

(Laura Johnston writes for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland.)

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