NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Archdiocese of Omaha opens sainthood cause for founder of Boys Town

Lisa Maxson Catholic News Service | Mar. 2, 2012

Archbishop George J. Lucas of Omaha, Neb., hangs an edict Feb. 27 announcing the opening of the cause for sainthood for Fr. Edward Flanagan on the doors of St. Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha. (CNS photo/Mike Buckley, courtesy of Boys Town)

OMAHA, Neb. -- It started in 1917 with a rented house, five boys who needed a home in Omaha and a Catholic priest determined to help troubled and abandoned youths throughout the city.

Now, Boys Town helps more than 1.6 million people each year through its main campus of group homes, churches, a grade school and high school, post office and bank, as well as a national research hospital in Omaha, a national hotline, and other services and locations around the country.

And the priest who started it all -- Fr. Edward Flanagan -- might someday be named a saint.

The process toward canonization began Feb. 27 with Archbishop George J. Lucas -- surrounded by more than 200 people with dozens of cameras flashing -- placing a notice on the doors of St. Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha.

The notice, which is a centuries-old church tradition, alerts the public to the opening of Flanagan's sainthood cause. It also invites people to share their thoughts with a tribunal that is being formed to review the priest's life and works.

The process toward possible canonization continues with a March 17 Mass at Immaculate Conception Church at Boys Town -- where Flanagan's body is laid to rest -- with Lucas, Fr. Steven Boes, executive director of Boys Town, and other Catholic officials participating.

Flanagan will be named a "servant of God" at the Mass. In addition, the archbishop will install the religious officials and experts who will form the tribunal investigating Flanagan's work and reputation. Tribunal members will interview people who come forward as witnesses of Flanagan's virtue.

If there is a declaration of the priest's heroic virtues, the church will give him the title "venerable."

The second step is beatification, after which he is called "blessed." The third step is sainthood. At various steps

in the canonization process, evidence of alleged miracles is presented to church authorities. In general, two miracles need to be accepted by the church as having occurred through the intercession of the prospective saint.

If Flanagan is canonized, he would be the first person declared a saint whose ministry was based in the Archdiocese of Omaha.

The process could take years to complete -- or even decades, said Omar Gutierrez, director of the archdiocesan Office of Missions and Justice and the tribunal notary. In some cases, causes for sainthood are never completed because of a lack of witnesses, funds or volunteers or major gaps in the historical timeline for the person, he said.

But Gutierrez and others involved in Flanagan's cause said they believe the process could move relatively quickly because officials at Boys Town have organized easily accessible records on the late priest's life.

The groundwork for Flanagan's sainthood cause began 13 years ago, when several Boys Town alumni formed a group to build devotion to the priest and teach people about his life and mission as a mentor and protector of youth.

The Father Flanagan League Society of Devotion has been holding monthly prayer meetings at Flanagan's tomb, speaking about him publicly, coordinating prayer groups in Ireland -- Flanagan's native land -- and leading pilgrimages to Boys Town that reflect on his life and virtue.

"We are humbled and overjoyed by Archbishop Lucas' acceptance of our petition to examine the heroic virtue and sanctity of Father Flanagan," said Steven Wolf, league president and a 1980 Boys Town High School graduate.

"We see this as a response to the Holy Spirit that is moving through an international groundswell of devotion," he told *The Catholic Voice*, Omaha's archdiocesan newspaper.

Flanagan's vision made him a thoroughly modern man, Wolf said, and his example, words and beliefs about educating and raising children are as relevant today as they were in his lifetime.

Sharon Nelsen, the league's devotion coordinator, said Flanagan should be canonized a saint because he is someone to look up to in today's church.

"He's very redemptive for our church as a mentor and protector of youth and a diocesan priest with an impeccable record," she said. "I admired him when I started the effort and now I really reverence him as a visionary, as a holy person, as all inclusive."

Boes said Boys Town officials are excited to have the organization's founder receive such recognition.

"Though the process will be investigating proven miracles associated with Father Flanagan, we know that miracles occurred every day in his work to heal children in mind, body and spirit," he said.

The Irish priest devoted his life to the care of troubled and abandoned boys in Omaha, and he worked to ensure a safe place for those who needed his help.

Flanagan also struggled with respiratory and other health issues throughout his life, and those difficulties almost prevented him from becoming a priest. Shortly after his ordination in Austria in 1912, he moved to what was then the Omaha Diocese to be near his brother, Fr. P.A. Flanagan, and his sister, Nellie. He was assistant pastor of St. Patrick Parish in O'Neill and St. Patrick Parish in Omaha before opening his home for boys in downtown Omaha.

Despite opposition from some in the community, he took in boys of all races and religions. He believed love, education, training and faith would help each of them become responsible citizens, and his mission took him all over the United States and around the world.

He died of a heart attack in 1948 at age 61 while on a mission in Berlin.

Ten years earlier, Flanagan's work was recognized and made into a 1938 movie, "Boys Town," which starred Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney and won Tracy an Oscar for best actor.

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