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Family seeks sainthood for preist after cancer cured

BY ASHLEY KINDERGAN - The Record (Hackensack N.J.)

RIVER EDGE, N.J. -- A River Edge, N.J., resident is on a mission to get saint status for a beloved Detroit priest, who he believes answered prayers to heal his son's cancer.

Kevin Blute hopes the Vatican will make the Rev. Solanus Casey the first male saint born in the U.S., and suggested a friend's prayer group name itself after the friar. Blute's teenage son, Ryan, was diagnosed with melanoma in 2007 and has since recovered.

"I feel like I'm in gratitude to him big time, and so I want to do everything I can," said Blute, 50. "I also think it would be great for the country if we had an American-born male saint."

The River Edge, N.J., area chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a Catholic service and prayer group, is now helping fellow member Blute with his cause. The group now has about 100 active members from northern New Jersey. They have held fund-raisers for local charities and marched in parades in Bergenfield, N.J., and Yonkers, N.Y., with a big banner bearing Casey's name, hoping to pique people's interest.

The Church has already declared Casey venerable, the second step in a four-stage canonization process. Now, the friar's supporters need to document miracles that can be attributed to Casey's intercession. Blute hopes that people with miraculous stories will come forward.

To the Blute family, Ryan's story is a miracle. But the fact that he was treated with interferon immunotherapy for a year after his diagnosis may make his case a tough sell for the Vatican. The Church needs to document stories in which medical treatment cannot possibly explain a recovery.

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Ryan Blute was diagnosed with melanoma on his 14th birthday after having a mole removed in 2007. His grandmother, Anne Blute, belongs to a Father Solanus Casey prayer group in Yonkers, where the priest served at Sacred Heart Friary from 1904 to 1918. She gave Ryan a Father Solanus Casey relic badge to wear. The family started praying to Casey, too.

The cancer had spread to Ryan's lymph nodes, which doctors removed. Three days after the surgery, all the scans for cancer came back clean and subsequent scans have stayed that way.

Today, he is one of the top hitters on the River Dell High School baseball team.

Casey, a Capuchin friar, has long had a devoted following in Detroit, where he spent most of his career. Capuchins there have created the Solanus Casey Center and a guild that advocates for his canonization and documents possible miracles.

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican has not yet accepted any of the guild's submissions as miracles, said Brother Leo Wollenweber, a friar in Detroit and vice-postulator for Casey

"He had a great reputation for holiness," Wollenweber said. "He was very ordinary, very human, very interested in people and very easy to talk to."

Casey, the son of Irish immigrants, joined the Capuchin friars. He was ordained a priest in 1904, but was not permitted to hear confessions. He is most famous for his service as doorkeeper at the St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, where he started a soup kitchen, counseled people and gained a reputation as a healer.

One tale about Casey holds that a local Chevrolet plant was saved from the brink of collapse by an influx of orders that came in after an executive signed the company up to receive prayers from a Mass association that Casey promoted.

"He's a possible saint out of central casting," said Lawrence Cunningham, a professor of theology at Notre Dame University. "He fits a classical profile of someone who was heroically interested in the people who came to his door."

The president of a Detroit Hibernians chapter named after Casey hopes Blute's group will help to carry the torch in the future. The Detroit order still runs a charity event that feeds more than 1,000 people on Super Bowl Sunday, but members are getting older, said Bill Byrne, president.

"It's been hard to get recruits," Byrne said. "What's great about what Kevin and his group is, they've got about 100 guys, and they're mostly 40 and under."

If the faith of a new generation is what the movement to canonize Casey needs, it has found a young believer in Ryan.

The high school junior keeps a relic of Solanus in his wallet when he goes for scans at the hospital and when he took the SAT.

"When I need help, he's always with me," Ryan said.

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