

‘Apostle of the Alleghenies’ up for sainthood

The sainthood cause for Father Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin, a former pastor of St. Joseph in Taneytown and St. Patrick in Cumberland, has been opened by the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, Penn.

Father Gallitzin, a Russian prince who was the second priest ordained in the United States and the first to receive all his holy orders in this country, was the son of Prince Demetrius Alexeivich Gallitzin, the ambassador of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia to the Netherlands.

A circuit-riding priest who traveled many miles on horseback ministering in Western Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania and what is now West Virginia, Father Gallitzin earned the title “Apostle of the Alleghenies.”

Father Gallitzin converted to Catholicism from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1787. He studied for the priesthood at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore and was ordained by Archbishop John Carroll.

Monsignor Thomas Bevan, pastor of St. Patrick in Cumberland, said his parishioners are “very proud” that one of their former pastors is up for canonization. Father Gallitzin was the pastor of St. Patrick from 1790-95.

Father Gallitzin tried to hide his aristocratic background by sometimes going by the name “John Smith,” according to Monsignor Bevan.

“We had just cast ourselves loose of monarchy and he was afraid of not being accepted because he was of royal lineage,” said Monsignor Bevan.

The pastor noted that St. Patrick last year renamed its parish center in honor of Father Gallitzin.

Monsignor Martin Feild, pastor of St. Joseph in Taneytown, said his parishioners are equally excited that Father Gallitzin might become a saint. Father Gallitzin was the first pastor of St. Joseph, serving from 1797-99.

“It’s a great honor to the parish because he gave of himself so freely, not just in our parish but in the whole area,” said Monsignor Feild.

Father Gallitzin is known for a book he wrote in 1816 called “A Defense of Catholic Principles,” published in response to the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the era. He spent the last four decades of his life at McGuire’s Settlement in Pennsylvania, which he renamed Loretto after the Marian shrine in Italy.

The Vatican recognized Father Gallitzin as a “servant of God” in 2005. The Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown will now examine the priest’s writings as part of its investigation into his sanctity.