

Lithuanian nun with ties to Baltimore on path to sainthood

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A nun who walked the halls of St. Alphonsus School in Baltimore is on her way to becoming a saint.

Pope Benedict XVI recognized the heroic virtues of Mother Maria Kaupas July 1, declaring her “venerable” and putting her one step closer to beatification. The confirmation of a miracle through Mother Maria’s intercession will be needed for her to be declared “blessed” and another miracle would make her a saint.

Casimira Kaupas was born in Ramygala, Lithuania, in 1880. She traveled to Scranton in 1897 to work as a housekeeper for her brother, a parish priest. Witnessing the plight of Lithuanian immigrants, the young woman founded a teaching order of women religious called the Sisters of St. Casimir whose ministry would focus on the Lithuanian-American community. She took the religious name “Maria.”

Mother Maria’s order staffed St. Alphonsus School from 1921 to 1989, ministering to Lithuanian immigrants and others in the community. She visited the school several times.

Anne Lockwich, a parishioner of St. Alphonsus who attended the school, met Mother Maria at least four times at the school and on a farm in Pennsylvania run by the sisters in the 1930s.

“She was so holy all the time,” said Lockwich. “She was very friendly and she had eyes that pierced me like Bishop Fulton Sheen’s did.”

Despite her otherworldly demeanor, Mother Maria was also down to earth. Lockwich

remembered that the nun wasn't afraid of getting her hands dirty.

"They had pigs on the farm," Lockwich said. "She could tend to them by herself."

Sister Mary Francis Caplins, Lockwich's older sister, was deeply touched by Mother Maria and the sisters who taught at St. Alphonsus. They inspired her to join the Chicago-based Sisters of St. Casimir.

"They were very good teachers," Lockwich said. "My sister has bachelor's and master's degrees. They used to get a lot of grants so they never stopped learning. They educated their nuns very well."

Mother Maria, who died of bone cancer in 1940, helped establish a house for the Sisters of St. Casimir in Lithuania in 1920. Eight years later, the Sisters of St. Casimir began a health care ministry with the opening of Holy Cross Hospital in Chicago.

In addition to teaching at the now-closed St. Alphonsus School, the sisters taught at St. John of Arc School in Aberdeen from 1954 to 1997. Today, they sponsor two Catholic high schools and Holy Cross Hospital. They teach and operate other ministries in several states and Argentina.

St. Alphonsus parishioners are praying for Mother Maria's beatification, Lockwich said.

"I certainly am," she said. "I think she deserves it."