

'Saint exhumation' a first for accomplished forensic anthropologist

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It was lightly raining May 28 as Dr. William Rodriguez III stood in the plot where five nuns had been buried more than a century ago, sifting through each layer of their remains, anxious to see what he would find at the bottom. A forensic anthropologist, he was assisting the Oblate Sisters of Providence in exhumation of the remains of their foundress, Mother Mary Lange, who was buried in Baltimore's New Cathedral Cemetery in 1882.

The sisters had Vatican permission to transfer Mother Lange's relics to the Oblates' motherhouse in Arbutus, where they would be sealed in a new sarcophagus in their chapel's oratory. The move was prompted by her cause for canonization, and the move will make the Servant of God's remains more accessible for veneration and pilgrimage.

For Rodriguez, the exhumation was a welcome assignment – he was digging up a woman widely regarded as a saint, when most of his work has involved murder victims, or soldiers killed in battle.

Accomplished career

Born in Memphis, Rodriguez, 58, served as the chief forensic anthropologist and chief deputy medical examiner for special investigations for the Department of Defense Armed Forces Medical Examiner's Office for more than 20 years. If the federal government needed to identify human remains or determine cause or time of death, Rodriguez was their go-to. He kept a packed suitcase in his car, ready at a moment's notice to board a plane to his next assignment.

His work put him at the forefront of international news-making investigations, including forensics related to the Black Hawk Down incident in Mogadishu, Somalia; war crimes in Kosovo and Iraq; and Space Shuttle Columbia's explosion. He investigated numerous terrorist bombings, including those of U.S. embassies and the USS Cole.

He brushed his own death while analyzing the remains of Georgiy Gongadze, the

Ukrainian journalist whose suspected state-sanctioned murder in 2000 ignited the Orange Revolution. During that investigation, Rodriguez was poisoned with mercury in an attempt, he suspects, to halt the exposure of his findings. However, the incident wasn't the closest to dying he has come, he said, describing a 1989 situation in El Salvador when rebels attacked his hotel with the intent to murder him and his companions.

The last decade of Rodriguez's work was filled with the carnage of war, identifying the remains of soldiers whose bodies were ripped apart by IEDs. He has photos of tables lined with body parts, charred from explosions.

"This is what I dealt with every day during the war," he said. "If it was quarter sized, we sampled it (for DNA)."

Meanwhile, he investigated nongovernment cases, including the 2008 death of Caylee Anthony in Orlando, Fla., where he served as the defense's forensic expert in the 2011 murder trial of her mother, Casey. He also worked on cases for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for the State of Maryland, which had a relationship with the Armed Forces Medical Examiner's Office.

He left the Department of Defense in 2011, after the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, D.C., closed and the Armed Forces Medical Examiner's Office, which had been part of the Institute, moved to Dover, Del., as a result of Base Realignment and Closure.

Now a forensic consultant, Rodriguez works for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for the State of Maryland. He keeps a framed cover of a 2005 New York Magazine on the wall of his Baltimore office, the face of Lt. Ilario Pantano staring out directly above the headline "Murder and the Preppy Marine." Pantano was facing death row, accused of murdering two Iraqis, shooting them in the back as they were fleeing. Rodriguez's investigation proved he was innocent, that the men had been shot while running at him, as the marine had said.

A young 'mad scientist'

His private consulting practice is named Oracle Forensic Science Consulting, with the tagline "seeing what others do not." He didn't always plan to work with human bodies, but he always loved science. He told his parents he wanted to be a mad scientist, and they indulged him. He and his three brothers kept live snakes, dead rats and an active interest in electricity and geology. As a high school senior in 1973, Rodriguez was an international science fair finalist with a project involving rodent pheromones.

"I caught my bedroom on fire several times trying to do open heart surgery on frogs, and resuscitate them with electrical wire," he said.

As an undergraduate, he studied anthropology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with an interest in primates, and spent time in Gambia reintegrating

chimpanzees into the wild. He continued his graduate studies there, working with the university's famous Body Farm, pioneering research in body decomposition. By chance, he assisted an instructor in a homicide investigation, and decided to switch his concentration to physical anthropology, graduating with his doctorate in 1984.

Rodriguez thought his colleague was joking when he asked him in early May if he wanted to exhume a saint. He had once worked on a case for the Vatican, but he had never heard of Mother Lange, and didn't know the Oblates. A Catholic who attends St. Michael in Poplar Springs, his curiosity was piqued, and he agreed to the task.

The sisters asked him what he might find, and he honestly didn't know. Time, soil, temperature and a host of other factors play into the condition of remains. He hoped, for the sisters' sake, they would find something.

The task was complicated by the four other bodies sharing Mother Lange's grave. The arrangement is unusual, and likely chosen to save expense, Rodriguez said. He hoped to exhume the grave from the side, as not to disturb the other layers of the grave, but the plot was too close to its adjacent graves. His only choice was to dig down.

Because the sisters kept good records, Rodriguez knew the names and ages of the other sisters in the grave, and that Mother Lange was at the bottom. The excavation took a full day, beginning with an oath of secrecy required by the Holy See. The oath honored the dead and protected the event's privacy from photography or announcement via social media or other means that an exhumation was underway, drawing onlookers who could affect the event's integrity.

"No one is supposed to be there just because they're curious," said Xaverian Brother Reginald Cruz, the vice postulator for Mother Lange's cause for canonization.

Finding Mother Lange

They used a backhoe to begin the process, but Rodriguez and his team used a shovel and hand tools as they worked their way down in the grave. The caskets had decomposed. For most of the sisters, only the skulls and long bones were left, along with religious articles accompanying their burial.

After the first three sisters' remains were exhumed, they found the final two in the bottom of the grave, about seven feet deep. Although they had been buried separately, their skeletons looked as if they were cuddling. Rodriguez could tell one skeleton belonged to an older woman, and the other to a younger woman, just as they had expected. Twenty-one years after Mother Lange's death, a young sister professed her vows on her deathbed, and was buried above the foundress. Their skulls were brought up simultaneously.

Sister Mary Alexis Fisher, the Oblates' superior general, would later say that was a sign of Mother Lange's care for the younger sisters, even after death, and a message that God will bless the order with new vocations.

The bones Rodriguez determined to be Mother Lange's were in the best shape of them all, he said. All of the sisters' remains were brought back to his office, and he cleaned and analyzed them alone, according to Vatican requirements. When he was finished, they were collected by a local funeral home. Mother Lange's bones and accompanying objects were delivered to the Oblate motherhouse, and the other sisters' remains were held for later reburial.

On June 3, Rodriguez was among the witnesses of Mother Lange's reinterment in Our Lady of Mount Providence Convent Chapel during a two-hour canonical celebration. Along with Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori and other officials working on Mother Lange's cause for canonization, Rodriguez signed papers documenting the transfer of the remains, which included Mother Lange's skull, pelvic and long bones. The latter of which were bound together with red ribbon before being placed in the wooden reliquary, which was sealed in a marble sarcophagus in the wall of the oratory at the end of the liturgy.

Shared connections

Rodriguez feels a connection to Mother Lange now, he said, not only because of his work on her case, but because of their shared connections to Cuba. Mother Lange was born in Santiago de Cuba, but had sought refuge in Baltimore by 1813. Rodriguez's father's family was from Cuba, and his great-grandfather was a mayor of Santiago de Cuba.

That connection is strengthened by his Catholic faith.

"It was important for me as a Catholic to be involved" in the exhumation, he said. "I felt a much deeper responsibility because this was something that not only was being done for historical purposes, but this is something for my church. I felt honored to do it."

Catholics might be surprised to learn how much science backs the confirmation of miracles and canonization of saints, Rodriguez said.

"It bolsters your religion, your beliefs," he said, adding that the church has called on his colleagues in Italy for similar cases. "The church goes to great lengths to show that these things actually occurred, not just by hearsay, but actual evidence."

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