

# Surgeon tells of crucial miracle for Malta's first saint

LONDON – A surgeon who testified about the miraculous healing of a baby at a British hospital said he remains mystified by the child's recovery, the miracle that cleared the way for the canonization of Malta's first saint.

Dr. Anil Dhawan, professor of pediatric hepatology at King's College Hospital, London, told Catholic News Service May 22 there was "no scientific explanation" for the full recovery of the Maltese boy who had undergone "devastating" liver failure.

The Catholic Church has concluded that the baby was cured through the intercession of Father George Preca, a 20th-century priest who will be canonized by Pope Benedict XVI June 3. Dhawan, 45, gave evidence to a church tribunal set up in Malta to decide if the healing was a sign from God that Blessed Preca is a saint.

"The child was diagnosed with fulminant liver failure," he said. "There was a 90 percent-plus chance that he wasn't going to survive without a liver transplant. But he survived. Furthermore, he improved on his own.

"Acute liver failure in children is quite a devastating illness," he said. "The majority of them die. Scientifically, I do not have an explanation for this child's recovery."

The child, who has not been named publicly at the request of his parents, developed severe liver complications just days after his birth in July 2001.

He was examined at St. Luke's Hospital in Malta, but his condition was so grave that he was transferred to King's College Hospital, home to the world's largest pediatric liver center.

Doctors in London concluded that the baby would die if he did not receive a new liver. A date for the transplant was set, but days later it was discovered that the donor was not compatible.

At that point the child's family prayed to Blessed Preca that he would ask God to spare the life of their child. A glove used during the exhumation of the priest in 2000

also was placed upon the infant's body.

Less than a week later, the baby's liver started to function normally, and within another four days the baby no longer required a transplant. Today the child is a perfectly healthy 5-year-old.

In July 2002, the Catholic Church in Malta set up a tribunal to study the case, and Dhawan was among 38 witnesses to give evidence. The process came to an end in June 2004, and the documents were sent to Rome, where six months later the Vatican Congregation for Saints' Causes agreed that the case was valid.

Doctors and theologians of the congregation also discussed the case in 2006, submitting positive verdicts.

Dhawan, a Hindu, said he would be attending the ceremony in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican.

"I was involved in the process (leading to canonization), and I want to see it through completely for my own learning and curiosity," he said. "You can always learn from different faiths."

He said he accepted that occasionally events happened in medicine that could not be explained scientifically.

"We say, 'Yes, we could not do much more ourselves to help somebody, and yes, it could be somebody else who helped them.' And ultimately we are grateful to that person," he told CNS.

"I respect all the faiths myself and I have a lot to learn from every single faith, and I am sure my religion also believes in things like this. Some of them are not of human explanation," he said. "When you are a scientist you are supposed to believe in things that are black and white, but, unfortunately, life is not always like that."

Dhawan said that before the boy's healing he knew very little about how the Catholic Church recognized saints. But he said he had since spent much time reading about the process and took particular interest in the cause of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2003.

He said he was pleased and privileged to be part of the process of the canonization of Blessed Preca.

Blessed Preca died in 1962 at the age of 82 after founding the Society for Christian Doctrine, an organization of lay catechists committed to evangelization. The society today has more than 1,000 members around the world.

Pope John Paul beatified Blessed Preca in May 2001.