

Widower pursues sainthood for wife

Vatican to consider canonization for mother of 12 who co-founded ministry

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By Ann Rodgers,
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There are men who say, "My wife is a saint for putting up with me." But an Ohio man, Jerome Coniker, may prove it.

The Vatican has given approval to pursue sainthood for his late wife, Gwen, who was 62 when she died in June 2002.

"When the church looks for sanctity, they don't seek phenomenal signs or revelations or apparitions. They just look for the virtuous life. She sure qualifies for that," said Mr. Coniker, co-founder with her of the Apostolate for Family Consecration in Bloomingdale, Ohio. Together they raised 12 children, and have 65 grandchildren.

A 10 a.m. Mass today in the chapel of Catholic Familyland, a resort-retreat center that the Conikers built, will open the investigation into whether Mrs. Coniker exhibited the "heroic virtue" that the church requires of a saint. For six months investigators will interview more than 100 witnesses and examine everything ever written by or about her. She will then become known as "Servant of God Gwen Coniker."

It's going to take a miracle

Their reports will be sent to Rome, where theologians, bishops, cardinals and, ultimately, the pope, will decide if she was holy enough to proceed. If so, those promoting her cause will seek evidence of a medical miracle after someone sought her prayers. If the Vatican authenticates it, she will be beatified. One more miracle would be required for sainthood.

In Catholic teaching, anyone who dies and goes to heaven is, in fact, a saint. But the church chooses some as universal role models. Healings after the deceased is believed to have prayed for a medically hopeless case are considered proof of that soul's whereabouts.

Mary Ellen Redington, who is assisting her husband, Deacon Randall Redington, in organizing the work in Bloomingdale, said the group has received claims of miracles. But church rules forbid her to discuss them.

"If I told you and you printed it, we couldn't use it," she said.

Some experts say that Mrs. Coniker appears to be the kind of new saint that the Vatican is looking for: She lived and died



Mother Teresa embraces Gwen Coniker in 1985 before the nun recorded teaching programs for the Conikers' ministry. The two candidates for sainthood shared a deep devotion to St. Louis de Montfort.

in a happy marriage. The claim for heroic virtue is based partly on her refusal to abort her 11th child after a doctor warned that the birth would kill her. With her husband, she gave up affluence to found a ministry to families.

That ministry includes Catholic Familyland, which can house up to 1,000 people for swimming, horseback riding and Eucharistic devotion; the Familyland TV network; teaching centers in Mexico, Europe, Russia, Nigeria and the Philippines; and a vast array of books and media on Catholic theology for laity. At Familyland's annual Totus Tuus Family Conference, which begins Friday, Mr. Coniker will speak about his late wife.

They met at St. Gregory High School in Chicago and married in 1959, when she was 19 and he was 20. He later started a management firm that had Fortune 500 clients, and they bought a six-bedroom house near Chicago.

In the early 1960s, they threw themselves into the nascent right-to-life movement. By 1971 they concluded that the antidotes to abortion and family disintegration were spiritual, not political. They sold everything they had and moved to Fatima, Portugal — the site of a famed apparition of the Virgin Mary — to seek spiritual guidance. They stayed for two years.

In 1973 they moved to Kenosha, Wis., to work for a Franciscan community. They

were broke and uninsured, and Mrs. Coniker required a Cesarean section — the first of four — for the birth of their ninth child. A doctor donated his services and became a close friend. Two years and a 10th baby later, with another on the way, the doctor told Mrs. Coniker that her uterus would burst and kill her unless she had an abortion. She refused.

"She really thought she was going to die giving birth to Theresa," Mr. Coniker said.

She wrote a letter to her other 10 children, expecting them to read it after her death. In it, she told stories about each of their births, and how she had loved and welcomed each of them. It was her way of telling them to welcome and love the new baby in spite of her own death, said

Theresa Schmitz, 31, the child she refused to abort.

"All 12 of us children felt like we were her best friend," said Mrs. Schmitz, who works at Catholic Familyland. All 12 children are active Catholics.

No matter how they squabbled, her mother was a model of loving patience, she said.

"She always referred to herself as the 'baby sitter for God.' We were not her children, we were entrusted to her by God, and she handled us as such," Mrs. Schmitz said.

"If we wanted something that she felt would not be good for us, she put everything into perspective and helped us see that we were on loan to her and she needed to do her best to present us to our Lord in the next life."

But it was not easy.

Deeply in debt

In 1990, their ministry borrowed \$1 million to buy a long-abandoned seminary from the Diocese of Steubenville. Mr. Coniker envisioned an affordable resort where families could grow in faith. She saw moldering buildings that she would spend her spare time rehabbing and painting. She moved from a house in a town to a trailer in the middle of nowhere, leaving her married children and grandchildren.

“That was the one that really broke her heart,” her husband said. “She had to come out to Ohio with seven kids who didn’t want to come. It was her dark night for two years. But she knew it was God’s will.”

Their ministry thrived, though its growth kept them on the edge financially. They had high church connections — Mother Teresa recorded teaching tapes for their ministry, and in 1999, Pope John Paul appointed the Conikers to his Pontifical Council for the Family, which was made up of 20 couples who advise Vatican officials. One of their closest allies is Cardinal Francis Arinze, an important Vatican official, who spends part of each summer at Catholic Familyland recording the teaching programs.

In late 2001, Mrs. Coniker was diagnosed with hepatitis C and cirrhosis of the liver from a tainted transfusion administered during one of her Cesareans. She was set for a transplant when doctors found cancer.

As she had in 1975, she prepared her family for her death.

“We, the children, were very sad,” Mrs. Schmitz said. “We felt that she gave so much to God, you would think he would keep her here longer and bring a miracle to heal her.

“Her response was that our Lord can never be outdone in generosity. She believed that her reward was going to be in eternity. And she wanted to help all of us get there. She felt it was a sacrifice she was willing to make, to be in a place to intercede for us and help all families get there.”

She died June 22, 2002, and was buried in the crypt of St. John Vianney Chapel at Catholic Familyland. Shortly after her death, Mr. Coniker said, a visitor who was estranged from her 19-year-old son went to Mrs. Coniker’s grave and asked her to pray for their reconciliation.

“When she got back to her cabin she got a call on her cell phone from her son, who was crying and wanted to apologize,” Mr. Coniker said.

Though it doesn’t fit the Vatican’s requirements for sainthood, “[the visitor] said that was a first-class miracle,” he said.

The Apostolate for Family Consecration sought and received church permission to ask prayers for Mrs. Coniker’s sainthood. The investigation is beginning just two months past the minimum five-year waiting period.

Working toward canonization

Bishop Daniel Conlon of the Diocese of Steubenville has helped by filing and relaying the appropriate paperwork, but



Gwen Coniker, far left, and husband Jerry, far right, with their 12 children, two sons-in-law and four grandchildren in front of their home in Kenosha, Wis., in 1985.

the bulk of the work is being done by the staff at Catholic Familyland.

There’s nothing wrong with a man believing that his wife is a saint and seeking church recognition for that, said the Rev. James Martin, a New York Jesuit and author of “My Life With the Saints.”

“Good for him. What’s the difference between that and a local bishop believing that one of his priests is a saint? That’s the way those things get started,” he said.

Mrs. Coniker would fill a gaping need for a saint with a healthy marriage, he said, adding that he believes Rome is seeking such saints. Most saints are priests and nuns because the canonization process is so long and costly that only religious orders and dioceses could see it through, he said.

“Also, in the not too distant past, the theology was such that a priest, brother or sister was seen as holier than a lay person,” he said. Most married saints either became celibate in later life or were virtuous despite a bad marriage. One married couple, canonized in 2001, lived for 26 years “as brother and sister,” which Father Martin said “shows the church’s past problem with sexuality.

Looking for a married saint

“I think it’s great that the church is looking for people like this,” Father Martin said.

“A holy parent is just as holy as a holy priest or nun. But most Catholics still have

a hard time understanding sanctity in terms of everyday life. They still think it’s restricted to people like Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa.”

The canonization of someone like Mrs. Coniker “would revolutionize the idea of holiness,” he said.

Mr. Coniker believes his wife is helping people with family problems from heaven, just as she did on earth.

“She was a great reconciler,” he said. “She never had an agenda. When you came to her for advice she would just listen and then dialogue with you. In most cases, when you were done with the dialogue, you knew what you had to do.” Mrs. Redington has a 4-inch stack of e-mails from people who have prayed for Mrs. Coniker’s intercession. Although some are from people who knew her, many are not, she said.

The fact that devotion to her is spreading will be considered evidence of sanctity, Father Martin said. It may help that her home diocese in Steubenville is a hub for Catholic renewal movements.

“St. Gwen of Steubenville, pray for us,” Father Martin said. “You can laugh, but that would go over very well.” Anyone with information related to Mrs. Coniker’s cause can contact gwenconikercause@familyland.org or 1-800-77-FAMILY.