

ALLEGED SEELOS HEALING CASE NOT RECOMMENDED FOR ADVANCEMENT

Father Byron Miller, C.Ss.R., Vice Postulator for the Seelos Canonization Cause -- 14 November 2011

In May 2009, Most Reverend Edwin O'Brien, Archbishop of Baltimore, convoked the official Diocesan Inquiry into an alleged extraordinary healing through the intercession of Blessed Francis Seelos. The fact-finding Inquiry Panel investigated the case and heard the sworn testimony of Mary Ellen Heibel, her primary physician and nurse, and other key witnesses, concerning Heibel's cure of metastasized esophageal cancer. Heibel, a devout Catholic and parishioner of Saint Mary's Church in Annapolis, Maryland, had been cancer-free since January 2005, even though the disease had spread to her liver, lungs, back and sternum, and medical treatment had failed. The cancer disappeared one week after she helped begin a weekly Seelos novena in her parish.

Diocesan Inquiry officials completed their investigation in September 2010. In October 2010, the Redemptorist Postulator General, Reverend Antonio Marrasso, submitted the results to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints to undergo proper scrutiny by Vatican authorities on whether or not the cure met the criteria for the one miracle needed in Seelos' canonization.

On October 30, 2011, Vice Postulators Byron Miller and John Vargas were informed by Father Marrasso that Professor Paolo Marchetti, oncologist and medical expert of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, had finally given his preliminary expert's report regarding the diocesan investigation.

Professor Marchetti's clinical conclusions affirm that Mary Ellen Heibel, from the first months of 2005, show no signs of metastatic esophageal neoplasia. "This result, in light of present scientific knowledge, does not appear to be explicable from the chemotherapy employed." Consequently, "the clinical result which was obtained cannot be scientifically explained."

However, in a subsequent meeting with Father Marrasso, Professor Marchetti indicated that in order to declare the disappearance of the metastatic esophageal neoplasia as complete, immediate and lasting, it would have been much more opportune to wait at least 10 years from the healing event. This waiting period would have confirmed the disappearance of all the tumor cells, giving certitude of a complete and definitive healing.

Mary Ellen Heibel passed away in October 2009—four years after the alleged healing—even though it was due to a completely different cause: complications from pneumonia.

Professor Marchetti advised Father Marrasso not to proceed with the Process of this case. Moreover, Father Marrasso has noted a tendency by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints to reject presumed miracles involving the healing of tumors, because permanent healings are rarely found in light of recent scientific studies.

For Father Marrasso, "it is clear that the healing presented all the signs of being extraordinary," especially, "if one takes into account that for esophageal cancer, chemotherapy 'is exclusively used to control the symptoms and to ameliorate the symptomology, and not to heal the patient.' Unfortunately in our case it is no longer possible to ascertain the complete and definitive healing. I am very well aware that this thought gives only scant consolation. On another note, however, the certainty remains that everything that happened to Mrs. Heibel through the intercession of Blessed Seelos, should be considered an exceptional grace and that prayers of intercession to the Blessed do not go unheard." Father Marrasso concludes, "I am convinced that in the future, we will have an extraordinary and unquestionable case that will make it possible for us to celebrate the canonization of Blessed Seelos."

Where does the Seelos Cause go from here?

A lot of confidence was placed in Father Marrazzo's efforts in presenting this case to Vatican officials, so we trust that his recommendation for withdrawal is the right decision. His statement that the Congregation for the Causes is disinclined to accept alleged healings involving tumors is noteworthy. (For example, in July 2005, a pregnant woman diagnosed with Burkitt's lymphoma, a rare and aggressive form of cancer, was cured after a single, six-week cycle of chemotherapy; she attributed her healing to the intercession of Venerable Pius XII. After consulting two outside doctors, the local bishop determined that she could have been cured by even a single cycle of chemo and essentially closed the case.) In the future, it may be more beneficial to submit a healing that does not involve cancerous tumors.

Is there another case to submit?

Advocates for the Venerable Solanus Casey Cause in Detroit are hoping for a favorable response on a case that will result in Casey's beatification. They are still collecting testimony in the event that the current case, like others before it, is deemed insufficient. Since Seelos' beatification in April 2000, we have thoroughly compiled two separate healings of significance for Father Marrazzo to review. Of the two, it was widely believed that the Heibel case had enough merit to conclude the Diocesan Phase, even with Mary Ellen's untimely death several weeks after she was officially deposed under oath by the Baltimore Archdiocesan Tribunal. It seems advisable to wait for another case so extraordinary that the third time might be a charm! With that said, there are a number of cases on file to revisit in light of this development to see if they warrant further investigation.

Is there a "double standard" in the process regarding more popular causes than Seelos'?

While some may question if a French nun's cure of Parkinson's disease was properly diagnosed to result in Pope John Paul II's beatification, or if the survival of a 2-year-old who overdosed on Tylenol should have facilitated Edith Stein's canonization, there is another dimension to the overall process that is without question: evidently, God desires that Father Seelos enjoy his beatified status for a longer period of time, and there is someone who remains to be healed through Blessed Seelos' intercession in a complete and definitive way to culminate in his canonization!

Was there an enormous amount of time and effort expended in compiling this case? Absolutely. Was there hope that Pope Benedict XVI could have canonized Seelos, a fellow Bavarian? Positively. Was this news greeted with much personal disappointment? Certainly. However, Mary Ellen Heibel worked the hardest to see this case through to completion, and if her cure of metastasized esophageal cancer through Blessed Seelos' intercession helped add four more years to her life, then "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" May her soul rest in peace.