

Claiming 'Healing Powers,' Catholics Push for Baseball Star Roberto Clemente's Sainthood

Richard Rossi is on a crusade of sorts, traveling to cities across the country to collect stories about the fabled healing powers of baseball great Roberto Clemente.

His goal? Nothing short of making Clemente an officially recognized Catholic saint.

"He had a calling to be a great baseball player," Rossi said, "but he had a calling beyond baseball."

Clemente played right field for the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1955-1972. He reached 3,000 hits and won the National League MVP trophy in 1966.

On Dec. 31, 1972, Clemente boarded a flight in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to ferry relief supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Soon after takeoff, the plane crashed, killing Clemente and four others.

Rossi was only 9 years old when Clemente died but remembers going to Pirates games for \$1 with his father. Since then, Rossi said he's read almost everything written on Clemente and talked with many more people who knew him.

After talking to several people, including a nun, Rossi said, he learned the religious side to Clemente had been left out of most biographies. So, Rossi, a 51-year-old Catholic and independent filmmaker in Hollywood, made it one of the bigger parts in his movie, *Baseball's Last Hero: 21 Clemente Stories*.

Now, Rossi and a group of volunteers are listening to people's

stories about Clemente, and they're using the scientific tools of X-rays and medical records to verify tales of Clemente's miraculous healing touch.

Under normal circumstances, miracles are considered much later in the process, after the church has officially opened a sainthood cause. Catholic teaching says miracles attributed to a saint—two are needed for canonization, after his or her death—are evidence that the person has God's ear in heaven.

"One reason the Catholic Church has lasted a couple of thousand years, it has this kind of process, they're very slow and so we want to make sure we present something that, you know, has a lot of credible evidence," Rossi said.

Rossi already has several supporters on his side, including Duane Rieder, executive director of the Clemente Museum in Pittsburgh.

Rieder said he has spent time talking to family, friends and nuns who knew Clemente; they say he predicted his own death through dreams of him dying in the ocean and his body not being found.

But Rieder said he feels that the most important part is not the way Clemente died, but the way he lived his life for others.

"He's the only true baseball hero. He's the only person, player that ever gave up his life helping other people. Everybody else, you know, Babe Ruth wasn't a hero. He was a hell of a baseball player," Rieder said. "Roberto Clemente was the only true baseball hero."

Rossi is also looking for support from bishops, including Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan—and even Pope Francis.

"The purpose of my writing is to humbly ask your blessing my

efforts to defend the beginning of the canonization of Puerto Rican athlete humanitarian Roberto Clemente," the letter says.

As the archbishop of San Juan, Nieves would have to sign off on Clemente's sainthood cause and move the process along to the Vatican. The Archdiocese of San Juan did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Rossi also hopes to meet with Pope Francis and show him his movie. "I think he is the perfect pope for this—No. 1, being Latin American. But No. 2, he thinks outside the box."

Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, a Latina theologian at Chicago Theological Union, is writing a book about Clemente, *El Santo! Baseball and the Canonization of Roberto Clemente*. She said anything is possible with Pope Francis, but due to a canonization process that can stretch on for centuries, she isn't so sure Clemente will make the cut.

"All evidence seems to point to that Clemente was a good guy who tried to lived his life well. So in that sense, you know, does he have a chance at being considered a saintly person? Sure," she said. "Will that make him into the canonization process that makes him an officially recognized saint in the Catholic Church? I'm not so sure."

But Nanko-Fernandez said Hispanic Catholics can continue to venerate and honor him, making him an unofficial saint.

"It's not necessary for one to become an official saint to be considered a saint," Nanko-Fernandez said.

For Rossi, Clemente is needed as a saint for "ordinary" people to look up to. Clemente lived his life for others and died in service to the poor, Rossi said, and what could be more saintly than that?

"When we look at the process of canonization, unfortunately, it's very weighted towards celibate people that choose the

vocations of being a priest or nun,” Rossi said. “I mean, there’s a very small percentage that walk it out in the real world as a family-first man, as a husband, as a father, in a secular culture, as a baseball star.”

Copyright 2014 Religion News Service. All rights reserved. No part of this transmission may be distributed or reproduced without written permission.