Little Cajun Saint

Devotees try to find path to sainthood for 12-year-old who died in 1959

BY PATRICIA GANNON

Charlene Richard was 12 in 1959 when she died from acute leukemia. Her very short life was considered "special" by local Catholic clergy and by the thousands of annual visitors to her grave. But reaching sainthood is not easy. Only 10 reached that status in 2016, and just 13 of the handful of canonizations are expected for 2017. The little Cajun girl from Richard is not among them.

However, there is a growing number of clergy and popular devotion worldwide that would welcome an official canonization for her. But those wheels grind slowly. In Charlene's case, there is some sense of urgency.

"What makes the difference is that people remember. We don't want anyone to forget. It's crucial we get this going while people are alive who knew her," said Bonnie Broussard, president of Friends of Charlene for 20 years.

Broussard is the only person from the original nonprofit grassroots organization formed to promote Charlene for canonization.

"So many people believe in her, including her own family. All of them believe," Broussard said, adding, "God sometimes says no, yes or wait."

Broussard and others are hoping the appointment of Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel in early 2016 will rekindle interest in canonization. Deshotel will celebrate Charlene's 50th Anniversary Mass of Petition at 6 p.m. Friday, Aug. 11, at St. Edward Catholic Church in Richard.

The Catholic Church puts would-be saints to the test, and the process is lengthy and expensive. Costs include lawyers to depose, interviews and reports, all investigated first by the individual's local bishop. While cases have been brought to the attention of the local diocese in the past, the process for Charlene's canonization has not been officially opened.

Once an investigation is completed, a bound volume is sent to the Vatican, where the same complex process in use for centuries sifts the miracles from mere coincidence.

The Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints can reject, accept or simply choose to declare the person "heroically virtuous," meaning they pursued holiness on earth. To proceed further requires a miracle through the intercession of that person, usually healings, which have to be verified as scientifically inexplicable by a group of independent doctors.

Then the person is approved by a panel of theologians. Final approval lies with the Pope, who declares the person blessed.

A second miracle is needed for sainthood and is scrutinized as thoroughly as the first.

"I remember a Vatican representative saying, 'There are a lot of good people in the world, but until the Church declares you a saint, you aren't one,'" Broussard said.

"Not always religious herself, Broussard became convinced when her sister moved away. "We were seven children, and no one ever left home," she recalled. "I had a prayer card and thought, 'I'm going to ask Charlene to help.'"

For several months, Broussard prayed for her sister and husband to move back to Louisiana, but the couple was transferred even further away.

"I didn't panic. The day their down payment was due on the new house, they got a call saying the previous manager wanted his old job back, but they could go any..."
where they’d like,” she said. “By the end of January, they were back.

“That’s what sold me. In my mind, Charlene intervened. At a time in my life when I really needed to know, I put her to the test.”

Others have done so as well. A new church was suddenly funded in the poor rural community after prayers by its new priest. Following Charlene’s anniversary Masses, petitioners’ prayers were answered, attracting thousands more to her grave site. Books followed, more testimonials and a ministry of prayer cards and prayer cloths sprang up. A South American priest was purportedly cured of end-stage cancer, likewise a woman from Acadiana.

Oncologist Luis Meza acknowledges at least one other case where the element of healing wasn’t clearly understood.

“One particular patient had difficulties with her chemotherapy treatment and was not responding well. Her family took her to visit Charlene’s tomb, praying fervently for a cure,” Meza said. “Afterward it was so heartening to watch her response to the treatments. She was in remission, moved away to another state, and lived a most productive life, going on to become a successful oncology nurse. The only difference in her treatment were the visits to Charlene’s tomb.”

Deacon Reginald Bollich, of St. Jules in Lafayette, was successful funding needed construction at a Thai orphanage abroad. Bollich, a retired engineer, had little hope of obtaining the thousands of dollars for the project and credits divine assistance.

“With Charlene, there’s no coincidence,” Bollich said. “She puts people together. That’s how I see her, as getting things done. Do I see it as miraculous? Yes. It helps to have the big miracle, but quantity helps also. The more things happen, the more it matters.

“This is what we believe, that Charlene intercedes,” Broussard said. “She goes before God and asks. You can put her to the test.”

John Dale Richard is the oldest of Charlene’s nine siblings and recalls his sister as vivacious and studious, as well as faithful.

“Just an ordinary country girl, not holier than thou,” he said. “Everything she did, she did well.”

He remembers her as a small David facing Goliath, standing up to school bus bullies.

“I was a little ashamed,” he said with a laugh. “It should have been me, but she was the first one to tell them, ‘This is it. Cut it out, or you’ll deal with me.’ Her faith was real.”

Richard, a retired nurse, said within 13 days of Charlene’s diagnosis, she was buried.

“She asked the priest to pray for others,” he said. “A lot of things happened.”

The priest was the Rev. Joseph Brennan, ordained just three months at the time.

“What amazed me was her maturity,” Brennan said. “She understood redemptive suffering. As a young priest, I couldn’t get over this.

“She said, ‘I’ll be with you in heaven, praying for you.’ And for 58 years, she’s been with me.”

Brennan speaks with certainty of a holy presence in the hospital room the night of Charlene’s death and of his weeping afterward.

“I was convinced the day I met her,” he said. “But for the first couple of years, I didn’t want to talk about it.”

Brennan, whose background was journalism before it was theology, has experience with saints, having traveled to India with Mother Teresa. He has written books about both, “My Name is Charlene” and “Mother Teresa, a Friend Remembered.” He said Charlene came to him following a severe heart attack, from which he is still recuperating, and senses spiritually this year is special.

“I’ve been hoping for that for 58 years,” Brennan said. “I’ve preached her cause, and it’s up to the church to move. They’ll move when the time is right.

“I have faith.”