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Sainthood for Father Kino gets major advance

By Stephanie Innes

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The effort to elevate one of Tucson's most important historic figures to Catholic sainthood has taken a major step forward, supporters of the canonization of Father Eusebio Francisco Kino say.

One hundred and thirty pounds of documents that support Kino's beatification — the second to last step toward sainthood — were presented to the Congregation of Rites in Rome on May 4, said Paolo Rossi of the Associazione Culturale Padre Eusebio F. Chini in the village of Segno, Italy, where Kino was born. Chini was Father Kino's birth name.

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- For more information about the Associazione Culturale Padre Eusebio F. Chini go to www.padreokino.org

"People seem to be relieved that the papers are now in Rome," Rossi said.

Supporters have no idea when an announcement about Kino's beatification will be made, he said. The final step after beatification is canonization, or elevation to sainthood, and Rossi said supporters are hopeful that will happen by the 300th anniversary of Kino's death, in 2011.

The impetus for the canonization of the Jesuit priest, whose likeness sits on horseback at 15th Street and Kino Parkway, is coming primarily from Italy and Hermosillo, Rossi said. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson also is supporting the cause.

An ardent Kino supporter in Tucson, the Rev. Charles Polzer, died unexpectedly in 2003. Polzer was a retired curator of ethno-history at Arizona State Museum and had worked on the effort to declare Kino a saint since the 1960s.

It was Kino's work in the Sonoran Desert that qualifies him for sainthood, Rossi stressed. Kino is credited with bringing Christianity to the area. Today, about 27 percent of Tucson's population is Catholic.

Kino founded or started 21 missions in the Pimeria Alta, or the land of the upper Pimas, in Northern Sonora and Southern Arizona in the late 1600s and early 1700s in an attempt to turn American Indians in the area to Christianity. The missions include those at San Xavier, Tumacácori and Guevavi.

Kino also introduced cattle and new crops to the region. In 1700, he put down the foundations for a church at the village of Bac, on the Santa Cruz River near modern Tucson, to be named after his patron saint, St. Francis Xavier.

Kino's dream of a church here later was realized by Franciscans and Tohono O'odham Indians, who built the stunning structure of San Xavier del Bac. It remains an active church, recently restored, at the site of the northernmost post on Kino's mission circuit.

The committee to declare Kino a saint formally began its work after a skeleton identified as Kino's was discovered in 1966 in Magdalena de Kino, Sonora, 50 miles south of Nogales.

In 1967, the process began with Carlos Quintero-Arce, archbishop of Hermosillo, Sonora, who retired in the late 1990s. The current archbishop of Hermosillo, José Ulises Macías Salcedo, has continued the work by constituting a tribunal that includes Quintero-Arce and several priests in the Archdiocese of Hermosillo to make a formal case for

beatification.

Though many missionaries who converted indigenous populations to Christianity have been criticized, Polzer told the Star in 2000 that Kino always resisted Spanish military policy toward American Indians and dealt with all people respectfully, never exploiting them.

Indeed, members of the Tohono O'odham Nation continue to make pilgrimages to Kino's gravesite in Magdalena de Kino each fall, and until the early 1990s the tribe held re-enactments of Kino's arrival in the Sonoran Desert. About 85 percent of the tribe is Catholic.

A possible stumbling block to Kino's canonization may be that the Vatican requires evidence of two miracles linked to the person's intervention before sainthood can be approved, Rossi said. But he said supporters remain faithful.

"One of the things Father Polzer always said is it's a miracle his memory is being kept alive after so many years," Rossi said.

To Learn More

- For more information about the Associazione Culturale Padre Eusebio F. Chini go to www.padreokino.org
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