News



The body of Sister Mary Wilhelmina Lancaster, foundress of the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles, lies in the Abbey of Our Lady of Ephesus in Gower, Mo., May 26, 2024. (OSV News/Megan Marley)

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Bishop James V. Johnston of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, released results of the investigation by medical experts into Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster's incorruptibility in a press release on the diocesan website Aug. 22, the feast of the Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"The body of Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster does not appear to have experienced the decomposition that would have normally been expected under such previous burial conditions," stated a news release on the official diocesan investigation of incorruptibility into the late Black Catholic nun who founded the Benedictine Sisters of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, in Gower, Missouri.

According to the release, the bishop commissioned a team of local medical experts in May 2023 to conduct an examination and evaluation of Sister Wilhelmina. A doctor of pathology led the team, assisted by two other medical doctors and a former Missouri county coroner. In addition to examining and evaluating the body, the team inspected the casket and conducted interviews with eyewitnesses to the events immediately preceding Sister Wilhelmina's burial in 2019 and the exhumation in April 2023.

According to the release, the final report said the investigative team examined Sister Wilhelmina's body and found its condition lacked detectable features of decomposition. Although the casket's lining had completely deteriorated, Sister Wilhelmina's habit and clothing had no such features of breakdown. It also noted the circumstances of Sister Wilhelmina's death and burial did not suggest anything that could be expected to protect her body and clothing from decomposition.

The release said the investigative team's examination was limited but still concluded "the condition of her body is highly atypical for the interval of nearly four years since her death, especially given the environmental conditions and the findings in associated objects."

Additional tests were conducted on the soil in which the burial took place, according to the release, which stated that nothing unusual was found that could explain the condition of Sister Wilhelmina's body upon its exhumation.

"The Catholic Church does not have an official protocol for determining if a deceased person's body is incorrupt, and incorruptibility is not considered to be an indication of sainthood," the press release noted. "There is no current plan to initiate a cause for sainthood for Sister Wilhelmina."

However, Johnston in the release stated that he prayed Sister Wilhelmina's story "continues to open hearts to love for Our Lord and Our Lady."

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Foundress of the Benedictine Sisters of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, in Gower, Missouri, Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster of the Most Holy Rosary died in May 2019 at age 95. On April 28, 2023, her body was exhumed from her grave to move it to a tomb in the monastery's chapel. Despite her body not being embalmed, damage to her wooden coffin and water sitting on her grave — all elements that should have contributed to her body's decomposition — her body was found remarkably intact, the community's sisters said at the time.

The sisters laid their foundress's body in the main chapel and protected her skin with wax. As word spread, Catholics from the region and then around the country began to flock to see her. The sisters allowed visitors to press holy items against Sister Wilhelmina's body to create relics should the foundress ever formally be declared a saint.

In the month and a half following the removal of their foundress from her previous resting place, Mother Abbess Cecilia Snell of the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles gave a conservative count of 10,000 to 15,000 regarding the number of pilgrims who flocked to her abbey in rural Missouri.

Sister Wilhelmina's body was placed behind glass in a small St. Joseph shrine within the abbey church in late May 2023, just to the right inside the main doors.