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Religious Life



A cause for the canonization for Sr. Annella Zervas, pictured in an 1926 photo after her death, is moving forward, announced Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minn., Aug. 20, 2025. Annella was a Benedictine sister from Minnesota who died in 1926 at age 26 after enduring a terrible and mysterious illness with steadfast faith and trust in God’s will. (OSV News/Courtesy of Sister Annella Guild)

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The beatification cause for Sr. Annella Zervas, a Benedictine sister from Minnesota, will formally begin this fall, Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, announced Aug. 20.

Cozzens said a Mass opening the cause's diocesan phase will be held Oct. 9 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Crookston.

The Mass was scheduled after Cozzens received a declaration of "nihil obstat" from the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints indicating that the Holy See sees nothing standing in the way of advancing the cause for Annella, who died in 1926 at 26 years old after cheerfully and faithfully suffering a terrible skin condition that ravaged her body.

"I hope many from our diocese and throughout Minnesota and beyond will join us for this very historic celebration," Cozzens said in a video shared on Facebook and YouTube. "Sister Annella is a daughter of the Diocese of Crookston who was born and died in Moorhead, Minnesota, and she offers all of us an extraordinary example of deeply lived Catholic faith and deep trust in God."

With the opening of her beatification cause, Annella may be referred to as a "servant of God" as information is collected for a document called a "positio" to determine whether her life was one of heroic virtue. The diocesan phase will also include consideration of any "favors" or miracles attributed to her intercession, as well as the establishment of a historical commission aligned with the norms of canon law.

After the "positio" is completed, it will be sent to Dicastery for the Causes of Saints for review. Then it may be sent to the pope for a decree of heroic virtues. If the pope grants that decree, Annella would be given the title "venerable."

In general, for a cause to proceed to beatification, a confirmed posthumous miracle must be attributed to the venerable's intercession. A second miracle must usually be confirmed before a person is canonized and formally called a "saint."

"Through this cause, we begin the process of gathering evidence to determine if her life is one of heroic virtue" and imitation, and whether "formal recognition will be granted by the universal church," Cozzens said.

He noted that Annella is the first candidate for beatification from the Diocese of Crookston, and that she is one of the first from Minnesota.

Annella was born in 1900 when Moorhead was a growing town along the North Dakota border. She was a devout child, and, according to a biography, she "demonstrated a spiritual maturity that set her apart from her peers."

In 1915, a teenaged Zervas gained her pastor's approval and encouragement to enter the Benedictine convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota. She entered as a postulant that year, and four years later she professed her first vows. After her final vows in 1922, she was assigned to teach music and serve as an organist in Bismarck, North Dakota.

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A short time later, itchy and swelling skin and hair loss led her to seek medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The disease progressed, and her parents brought her home to Moorhead in the fall of 1924.

"Despite her severe physical suffering, which included violent chills, high temperatures, and painful attacks of itching, scratching, and weeping, her mental faculties always remained intact," according to a biography. "The pus-like discharge from the skin disease had a sharp, biting, and decayed odor. Her frail body exfoliated between a pint and a quart a day of skin. At one point, she existed on almost no food."

Despite her suffering, Annella remained cheerful, and amid fits of pain, she prayed. "Yes, Lord, send me more pain, but give me strength to bear it," she reportedly said. She only asked for God's will to be done.

She died on the vigil of the Assumption, Aug. 14, 1926. After a funeral Mass in Moorhead, her remains were buried 160 miles southeast at St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph.

Shortly after her death, reports of cures attributed to Annella's intercession began to circulate, and local devotion to her persisted for decades. That devotion appeared to wane in the second half of the 20th century, however, but it was revived after Patrick Norton, a local painter, reported having a vision of the sister in 2010 while working in the Benedictine's cemetery. A French woman who lives the Benedictine rule also claims to have been visited last year by Annella as part of the communion of saints and hopes to see the sister's cause advance.

In October 2023, Cozzens announced to a group of Catholics devoted to the nun that he was beginning an inquiry into her life that could lead to a cause for Annella's canonization. The effort is led by canon lawyers Amanda Zurface, the cause's postulator, and Msgr. David Baumgartner, a priest of the diocese of Crookston and president of the Sister Annella Guild. The guild is charged with advancing Annella's cause.

In November 2024, Cozzens received a vote of support from his fellow bishops to move forward with Annella's cause. In describing her life, he called her an "apostle of suffering for our day."

"Many people have expressed that her witness to the value of suffering has helped them embrace their own suffering with faith in God's goodness," he said. "Sister Annella is a true teacher of our Catholic faith, witnessing that each person, regardless of their struggle, has great dignity and is created for intimacy with God. And she teaches us that God is our truest friend, and our vocations are good even when they take a different path than we might expect."

Cozzens plans to preside at the Oct. 9 Mass, which is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Pre-Mass events begin at 4 p.m. with the opening of an exhibit on Annella's life, followed by a 5 p.m. presentation by Norton, the painter who reported encountering her in 2010. A 6 p.m. organ recital will then be offered as a tribute to Annella.

The opening session of the cause's canonical investigation will be held following the Mass.