

Vatican declares cure a miracle

Curing of cancer deemed Father Damien miracle

By Mary Adamski
madamski@starbulletin.com

Her rare form of cancer, called liposarcoma, appeared incurable.

After surgery in January 1998, Dr. Walter Chang told her that it had spread to both lungs and that "I cannot do anything for you."

That's when Audrey Toguchi turned her prayers to Father Damien, the 19th-century priest who ministered to leprosy patients at Kalaupapa.

And her cancer disappeared.

A panel of Vatican theologians said yesterday that Toguchi's spontaneous cure qualifies as a miracle - the second for Damien, placing him one step closer to sainthood.

A panel of Vatican theologians said yesterday that an Oahu woman's spontaneous cure from cancer was a miracle, linked to her prayers to Father Damien De Veuster.

The opinion brought the Catholic Church close to the final step of declaring the 19th-century priest, who ministered to leprosy patients at Kalaupapa, a saint. The cure, which was documented in the Hawaii Medical Journal in October 2000, was scrutinized earlier by a panel of Vatican medical consultants.

The announcement finally put Audrey Toguchi in the spotlight. She was identified by Honolulu Bishop Larry Silva when he announced the news on the local church Web page yesterday. Until then, her identity had been shielded by her doctor and church officials.

"Whenever I need help, I put everything in God's hands," said Toguchi, 79, of Aiea. "I just talk to him in my own words. I tell him, 'Here, Lord, help.' And I say thank you."

"I pray every single day," said the slight, soft-spoken grandmother. She retired in 1995 as an Aiea High School social studies teacher after 44 years of teaching in public schools.

"There is nothing spectacular about my life," Toguchi said. She said she lives a family-oriented life, in a modest home surrounded by spectacular flowers and plants, the work of her husband, Yukio, also a retired teacher. They travel whenever possible to visit their sons in Kona and Spokane, Wash., and three grandchildren.

When she became ill in 1997, with a lump on her left thigh that turned out to be cancer, Toguchi asked her sisters Beverly Plunkett and Velma Horner to go with her to Kalaupapa, to pray at Father Damien's grave. "I prayed that he would ask God to heal me."

After surgery in January 1998, Dr. Walter Chang told her that the rare form of cancer, liposarcoma, had spread to both lungs. "He said, 'I cannot do anything for you. No surgery is possible.'"

She continued: "I went back to Kalaupapa. I went to Mass and received Communion and then I went to Damien's grave. I said, 'Please, ask God to cure this cancer.'

"Doctor Chang took pictures of my lungs and every month, it was less and less until after four months, the cancer was gone. He was flabbergasted."

Toguchi said: "I didn't tell anybody about it. It's important to be humble."

Her family knew, of course, but "the subject doesn't come up," she said. "Life just goes on and you take care of your family."

Toguchi wrote to the late Pope John Paul II about her cure, setting in motion a process by which the Catholic Church determines if a person is worthy of sainthood. The cause requires a second miracle. The first miracle attributed to Damien was the spontaneous recovery of a terminally ill French nun in 1895, and he was declared "blessed" in 1995.

Toguchi's life, faith and medical history were scrutinized by church authorities. She was interviewed by a local panel and by Monsignor Robert Sarno from the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints. It was Sarno who notified her by e-mail yesterday that the theological officials agreed that it was a miracle.

Chang was one of the first people she notified. They are making plans to go to Rome for the canonization of Father Damien. That won't happen until the cardinals and bishops who make up the Congregation for the Causes of Saints take their turn to scrutinize the case and then pass their recommendation on to the pope for final approval.